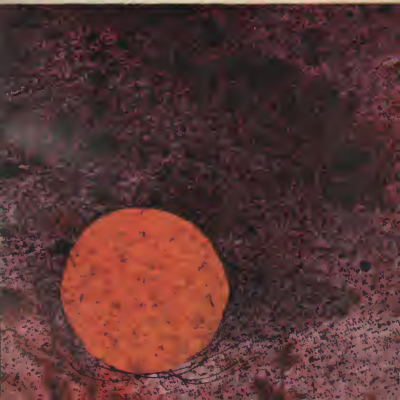


Science Fantasy

The Plague from Space

HARRY HARRISON



SCIENCE FANTASY

Edited by Kyril Bonfiglioli

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Editorial by Kyril Bonfiglioli

Unlikely as it may seem to those unacquainted with the world of printing, this is the first editorial to go to press since the International Science Fiction Convention held in London this year.

Never having attended one before, I cannot compare it with previous years but there was every appearance of a great success and every indication of enormous industry and organisation behind the scenes. Everyone's thanks are clearly due to Miss Ellas Parker and her collaborators; who in my opinion, to all those zealous people from overseas who proved their enthusiasm by travelling up to seven thousand miles to meet their kindred spirits.

One result of the Convention which will affect readers of this magazine and of NEW WORLDS is that both Mike Moorcock and I succeeded in obtaining full-length novellas from Judith Merrill—an authoress far too rarely seen in this country.

After LonCon there was a sort of OxCon centring on Brian Aldiss' house in Oxford: it was quieter by far, but no less festive and SCIENCE FANTASY profited exceedingly for, very late one night, those present agreed—in fact volunteered—to join in an all-star issue early next year with specially written stories round the theme of "sacrifice." The line-up is so impressive that I must resort to alphabetical order:

Brian W. Aldiss

Poul and Karen Anderson

James G. Ballard

James Blish

Harry Harrison

and cover design by Judith An Lawrence (Mrs. James Blish).

* * *

Another result of LonCon was that an earnest and persuasive fan from the United States succeeded in talking me into changing my mind about story rating—at least partially. In No. 72 I made it clear that I thought the practice invidious and statistically worthless; I still think so but am ready to

bow to popular demand. What I will NOT do is print a complete list and thus discourage or offend writers whose story appears at the bottom. Here are rating for Nos. 76 and 77:

76

Keith Roberts THE FURIES III *an easy winner.*
Robert Cheetham OMEGA & ALPHA *another by this new author will soon appear.*

Harry Harrison AT LAST . . . FRANKENSTEIN.
E. C. Tubb BOOMERANG.

77

Thomas Burnett Swann THE WEIRWOODS I *Mr. Swann's large and loyal following shows no sign of tiring.*
Philip Wordley GOODNIGHT SWEET PRINCE *a number of warmly appreciative letters about this one from people who do not usually write in.*

Johnny Byrne THE FOREIGNER *J. B.'s rather crazy stories have not been too well received hitherto but this one seems to have hit the mark.*

It will be noticed that I have not solemnly calculated percentages to several places of decimals—this is only possible when readers have listed stories in order themselves and would only be useful if many hundreds of such lists were received. On the other hand, the rating are definitely NOT made up arbitrarily: they are the result not only of counting the times a story is praised but of weighing the kind of praise—and to some extent the praiser.

* * *

I still receive letters accusing me of being Brian Aldiss in a false moustache and dark glasses—they are wrong: that's Harry Harrison. Nor is my name, as someone suggested in a letter this week, a fiendishly clever anagram. I really am a man called Kyril Bonfiglioli and I can prove it, so please stop wasting ingenuity on trying to prove that there couldn't possibly be any such person.

—continued on page 81

The first part of Harry Harrison's new, full-length, full-scale novel. In DEATHWORLD the villain of the piece was a whole planet: in this it is an infinitesimal virus. At first it seemed that no-one would be troubled but the wild-life societies and the pigeon-fanciers. At first . . .

PLAGUE FROM SPACE

by Harry Harrison

ONE

Dr. Sam Bertolli hunched forward over the chess board, frowning so severely that his thick, black eyebrows met and formed a single ridge over his eyes, then slowly reached out to advance his king's pawn one square. He relaxed only when the play screen flashed green—he had made the correct move, the same move Fischer had played in 1973 in Berlin. Then the board buzzed slightly and the opposing bishop slid out on a diagonal and stopped. The computer was playing Fischer's opponent in that historical game, Botvinnik, and the move was an unexpected and subtle one. Sam frowned again and bent over the board.

On the other side of the stainless steel table Killer turned the page of a magazine: it rustled loudly in the intense silence of the Emergency Room. Outside of the hospital the city rumbled and hummed to itself, surrounding them yet keeping its distance—but always ready to break in. There were twelve million people in Greater New York and at any moment the door could open and one or more of them would be carried in, white with shock or blue with cyanosis. Here on this table—on which they leaned so casually—blood-soaked clothing had been cut away, while the now silent room had echoed with the screams of the living, the moans of the dying.

Sam moved out his queen's knight to halt the developing attack. The screen flashed red, this was not the move that

Fischer had played—and at the same instant the gong on the wall burst into clanging life.

Killer was up and out of the door almost before his magazine hit the floor. Sam took the time to slide the chess board into a drawer so that it wouldn't get stepped on; he knew from experience that he had a second or two before the call slip could be printed. He was right, just as he reached the call-board the end of the card emerged from a slot in the panel and as he pulled it free with his right hand he hit the *accepted* button with his left thumb, then hurried outside. The cab door of the ambulance was standing open and Killer had the turbine roaring. Sam jumped in and grabbed the safety handle to brace himself for takeoff: Killer liked to hurl the heavy machine into action with a bank-robber start. The ambulance was shuddering as the turbine revved and only the brakes were holding it back. At the same instant Sam hit the seat Killer released the brake and stood on the throttle—the ambulance leapt forward and the sudden acceleration slammed the door shut. They hurtled down the ramp towards the street entrance.

"Where's this one, Doc?"

Sam squinted at the coded letters. "At the corner of Fifteenth Street and Seventh Avenue. A 7-11, an accident of some kind with only one person involved. Do you think you can keep this hurtling juggernaut going straight for about 100 feet while I get out the surgical kit?"

"We got three blocks yet before I gotta turn," Killer said imperturbably. "The way I figure it that gives you at least seven full seconds before you gotta grab onto something."

"Thanks," Sam said, swinging through the narrow walkway into the back and unclipping the grey steel box from the wall. He sat down again and braced it between his legs on the floor, watching the buildings and motionless cars whip by. Their emergency call was being broadcast to traffic control which flashed a warning light on the panel of every car within a four block radius of the ambulance, ordering them to the kerb and bringing all traffic to a standstill. The signal lights turned green in their favour and the warble of their siren kept the street clear of pedestrians. They hurtled through a landscape of frozen vehicles and staring faces where all the eyes turned to follow the rushing white form of the ambulance.

Dr. Sam Bertolli sat stolidly, swaying with the swift motion, his square-jawed face relaxed and quiet. This was Killer's part of the job, getting him to the scene of the emergency, and he considered it foolish to waste his time in speculation as to what he would find there. He would know soon enough. Sam was a big man, with big hands that had black hair curled over the knuckles, intensely dark hair. No matter how often he shaved, his cheeks had a blue tone and this, along with the permanent groove that was beginning to form between his eyebrows, gave him more of the look of a policeman or a prizefighter. Yet he was a doctor, and a fine one, in the top five of his graduating class the year before. Within a few weeks, by the end of June, his internship would be finished and he would begin a residency. He had his life under control.

Killer Dominguez appeared to be the direct opposite. A slight man with an oversize head, he was as wiry and nervous as a bantam rooster on an eagle farm. His skinny hands were clamped tightly to the steering wheel, his muscles knotted and tense, while his jaw worked nervously on a wad of gum. A thick pillow propped him up into driving position and his tiny feet seemed to be barely able to reach the pedals—yet he was the best driver on the staff and had started at the hospital only after sixteen years experience behind the wheel of a hack. The streets of the city were his world, he only felt comfortable when he was hurtling a few tons of steel along them, and as an eighth generation New Yorker he was attuned perfectly to this life, could imagine no other.

The tyres squealed as they turned into Seventh Avenue and headed for the crowd of people on one corner: a blue coated policeman waved them to the kerb.

"An accident, doctor," he told Sam as he climbed down with the heavy steel box. "He was operating a street elevator, one of those old ones, and somehow got his leg over the edge. Almost tore it off before the elevator stopped. I was just around the corner here, I heard him scream."

Sam shot a quick glance at the policeman as the crowd parted before them. He was young—and a little nervous—but he was holding up. Then the elevator was before them and Sam gave the scene a slow, thorough look before he snapped open the emergency kit.

The elevator had halted a foot below ground level and on its floor lay a heavy, grey-haired man about sixty years old with his left leg buckled underneath him in a pool of dark blood. His right leg was pinched between the metal edge of the elevator and the bottom of the ground level opening. The man's eyes were closed and his skin was waxey white.

"Who knows how to work this elevator?" Sam asked the crowd of staring faces. They were moved aside by a teenage boy who pushed rapidly through from the back.

"Me, Doc, I can work it, nothing to it. Just press the red button for down and the black one for up."

"Do you just know how it works—or have actually worked it?" Sam asked as he pushed his telltale against the inside of the patient's wrist.

"I've worked it, lots of times!" the boy said with injured innocence. "Brought boxes down for—"

"That's fine. Take control and when I tell you to, lower the elevator a foot. When I say *up* bring it up to ground level."

The details of the telltale registered instantly. Body-temperature below normal, blood pressure and pulse too low and too slow for a man of this age. Shock and probable loss of a good deal of blood; there was certainly enough of it on the elevator floor. Sam saw that the right pants leg had been cut open and he spread the flaps of cloth wide. The man's leg had been almost completely severed just above the knee and there was a black leather belt around the stump cutting deep into the white flesh. Sam looked up into the worried eyes of the policeman.

"Did you do this?"

"Yes. I told you I was near when it happened. We're not supposed to touch a case except in an extreme emergency. I thought this was one—the way the blood was pumping out he was sure to be dead quick enough no matter what else was wrong with him. I pulled off his belt and put it around his leg, then he passed out."

"You did the correct thing—he can thank you for saving his life. Now get the crowd back and tell my driver to bring the stretcher."

Sam's hands never stopped while he talked, taking the powered tourniquet from the box and pushing the stiffened tongue of metal under the injured leg. As soon as it emerged

a touch on the switch restored its flexibility; he wrapped it around the leg and inserted the end into the control box. When the sliding spheres were positioned over the major blood vessels he flicked on the power and it tightened automatically, applying the correct pressure to cut off all flow of blood.

"Take it down," he said, giving the man an intravenous injection of 0.02 mg. epimephrine to counteract some of the effects of shock. The elevator shuddered and dropped. The man groaned and rolled his head from side to side. Sam looked at the injured leg: it was very bad. Caught between the two metal edges it had been chopped through and almost severed, the femur was sheared and the lower part of the leg dangled, connected only by some skin and the crushed remains of the rectus and sartorius muscles. He made a quick decision. Slipping a large, razor-sharp scalprum from the kit he took a firm grip below the bloodstained knee with his free hand and severed the connecting flesh with a single stroke of the blade.

With the amputated limb wrapped in sterile sheeting and the injured man pulled away from the edge, he had the elevator brought back to ground level. Killer was waiting with the stretcher and, aided by the policemen, they lifted the wounded man onto it. With a professional flick of the blanket Killer covered him to the chin then wheeled the stretcher towards the waiting door of the ambulance. They moved smoothly, an experienced team, and while Sam latched the stretcher to the wall Killer closed the door.

"In a hurry, Doc?" he asked as he climbed into the driver's seat.

"As fast as you can without any sharp turns, I'm giving him plasma."

As he spoke Sam pulled the tube down from the overhead container, broke the seal on the sterile needle and slipped it into the antecubital vein in the patient's forearm through the swabbed skin.

"How's he doing, Doc?" Killer asked, accelerating smoothly into the emptied street.

"Good as can be expected." Sam strapped the recording telltale to the flaccid wrist which, in addition to displaying the vital information on its dials, made a continuous recording

of everything on a small disc. "But you better get through on the radio so they can set up the operating room."

While Killer made the call Sam turned the ultra-violet on the injured man's chest to reveal the invisible tattooing there: blood type, blood groups, date of birth and drug allergies. He was copying these onto the form when the overhead speaker scratched to life.

"Perkins here, in emergency surgery, I'm washing up. What do you have?"

"I have an amputation for you, Eddie," Sam said into his lapel microphone. "Right leg severed four inches above the patella. Patient is 63 years old of age, male blood type O . . ."

"What happened to the leg, Sam? Are you bringing it in for me to sew back on or should I start warming up one from the locker?"

"I have the old one here and it will do fine after a little debridement."

"I read you. Give me the rest of the report and I'll start setting up for him."

There were orderlies waiting on the receiving platform to throw open the door and wheel out the patient.

"You'll need this too," Sam said, passing over the sealed bundle with the leg. There was only a single space left on the report form now, he entered the time of arrival here and slipped the filled out form into the holder on the side of the stretcher as it passed. Only then did he notice the unusual bustle around him.

Something big, Doc," Killer said, joining him, his nose almost twitching as he sniffed excitement. "I'm going to find out what's going on." He headed quickly towards a group orderlies who were piling up sealed boxes at the edge of the platform.

Something was definitely going on, that was obvious. At the far end a truck was being loaded with medical supplies, while next to it two interns were climbing into a waiting ambulance.

"Dr. Bertolli?" a woman's voice asked from behind him.

"Yes, I am," he said, turning to face her. She was a tall girl whose eyes were almost on a level with his, greenish-grey eyes with a steady gaze. Her hair was a natural red that bordered on russet, and even the shapeless white lab smock

could not conceal the richness of her body. Sam had noticed her before in the hospital—was it in the staff cafeteria?—but had never spoken to her before.

"I'm Nita Mendel from pathology. There seems to be some sort of emergency going and Dr. Gaspard told me I would be going out with you."

She was not wearing a pin, nor did she have a cap on, so Sam was sure she couldn't be a nurse.

"Of course, doctor, this is our ambulance here. Do you know what's happening?"

"Nita, please. No, I have no idea at all. They just called me out of the lab and sent me down here."

Killer hurried over, feverishly chomping on his wad of gum. "Here we go, Doc. Hello Doctor Mendel, must be big if they dragged you down from the seventh floor." Killer knew everyone in Bellevue and heard all the gossip. "There is something big brewing but no one knows what. Hop in. The Meatball Express leaves in six seconds."

"Where are we going," Sam asked, looking at the dozen boxes labelled MEDICAL EMERGENCY KIT that had been shoved in on the floor of the ambulance.

"Kennedy Airport," Killer shouted over the whine of the turbine, making a tyre-squealing turn around the corner and diving into the mouth of the 23rd Street Tunnel under the East River.

The two doctors rode in the back, sitting opposite each other, and there was no way that he could avoid noticing that her lab coat was very short and, when she was seated, rode well above her knees revealing a most attractive length of tanned leg. Much nicer than the last leg that he had brought under his arm. He would rather look at this kind. The medical profession tended to be stern, sterile and well ordered, so that whenever a bit of visible femininity managed to penetrate he went out of his way to make sure that he appreciated it.

"The airport," she said: "Then it must be an accident, I hope it's not one of the Mach-5's—they carry seven hundred passengers . . ."

"We'll find out soon enough, there should be something on the radio." The sunlit mouth of the tunnel was visible

ahead and he called through the cab. "There might be a news broadcast, Killer, tune in WNYC."

As they came out into the open Ravel's Bolero swelled from the loudspeaker. Killer tried the other stations, but none of them were carrying a news broadcast so he switched back to the official city station as the one most likely to get the news first. They tore down the deserted freeway with the Bolero throbbing around them.

"I've never rode an ambulance before, its quite exciting."

"Weren't you ever on emergency duty while you were interning, Nita?"

"No, I stayed on at Columbia after I had my MD because cytology is really my field . . . have you noticed, the road is empty of traffic?"

"It's fully automatic, a radio warning is sent to all cars for miles ahead so that they've pulled over by the time we reach them."

"But—there aren't any cars pulled over, the road is just empty."

"You're right, I should have noticed that myself." He looked out of a side window as they roared by one of the entrance roads. "I've never seen this happen before—there are police blocking that entrance and they're not letting any cars through."

"Look!" Nita said, pointing ahead.

The ambulance rocked as Killer eased it over to an inside lane to pass the convoy, seven bulky army trucks rumbling after a command car, bouncing and swaying at their top speed.

"I don't like this," Nita said, her eyes wide. "I'm worried. What could be causing it?" She was suddenly very female and very little like a doctor: Sam had to resist the impulse to reach his hand across to hers, to reassure her.

"We'll find out soon enough, anything this big can't be concealed for long . . ." He stopped as the music died in mid-swell and an announcer's voice came on.

"We are interrupting this programme to bring you an important news flash. Two hours ago satellite tracking stations were alerted by the lunar radio telescope that an unknown object had been detected approaching the Earth along the plane of the ecliptic, and this was quickly identified as the *Pericles*, the

ship designed to penetrate to the surface of the planet Jupiter . . ."

"But—it's been years!" Nita gasped.

". . . would not respond to attempts at radio contact. This continued after the *Pericles* went into orbit around the Earth, making six revolutions in all before breaking orbit with what the space service has called very faulty control of the rockets, and then proceeded to make a landing approach. However, in spite of all radio and visual warnings, the *Pericles* did not attempt to land at either Sahara or Woomera spaceport but instead made an almost vertical descent on Kennedy Airport in New York. Normal flights were interrupted and there was a certain amount of damage that occurred during landing as well as feared loss of life. Stay tuned for further bulletins . . ."

"How—how bad can it be?" Nita asked.

"It could be pure hell," he said grimly. "There must be two thousand flights a day in and out of the field and it sounds as if they had very little warning. Then it depends where the spacer landed, far out on the runways . . ."

"Or on the buildings!"

"We don't know yet. But I do remember that the *Pericles* is as big as an apartment house and just about the toughest thing ever constructed by man. It would be hard to hurt the ship but I pity anything it sits down on top of."

"But why—it seems so stupid? Didn't they know any better?"

"You heard the news, they said the ship was badly controlled. It's been out there for over two years, no one ever expected it to come back. There's no telling what shape the survivors are in and I suppose that it's lucky they were able to land at all."

"Mother of God—look at that," Killer said between tight lips, pointing ahead through the windshield.

The expressway rose up here on giant pillars in order to span the complex traffic junction where the Long Island, city and airport traffic met. From the summit of this arching bridge they could see across the width of the airport, over the low, widespread buildings and hangars. A new structure had been added to this scene, a dark bulk that rose high up, five times higher than the control tower, a rounded and scarred mass of metal as wide as a city block. There was a

haze of smoke across the scene—then everything vanished as they swooped down from the bridge.

"Could you see where it was?" Nita asked.

"Not clearly—but it was away from the passenger depot, I'm sure of that."

Policemen—and military policemen—waved them on, guiding them through the maze of access roads and into a gate that led directly onto the field itself. A policeman held his hand up for them to stop then threw the driver's door open.

"You got the medical boxes from Bellevue?"

"Yeah, in the back," Killer jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"They want them, over by the SAS hanger, I'll show you where." The cop pushed in next to Killer and held onto the open door. There was grease on his face and his uniform was wrinkled and dusty. "That's it, where the other ambulance is, you can stop behind it. What a goddamn mess. That blowtorch came straight down, cooked a D-95 taking off, blew another one out of the air, landed right on a fuel truck. It's not sorted out yet. I never seen bodies like this..."

The policeman jumped out when they stopped and called to some nearby mechanics to unload the medical boxes. Sam started to help Nita down when a haggard looking police captain appeared.

"Are you doctors?" he asked.

"Yes," Sam said. "Where do they need us?"

"Look, I think there are enough medics here, there was a charter flight of doctors to a convention that we found, it's the supplies we need most right now. But there was a report from the tower of a company jet last seen on the taxiway when that damned thing set down. I haven't checked on it, there was too much to do here. Could you take a look, it would be around the other side somewhere. All air traffic has been diverted, you can cut across the field."

"Of course, we'll go now, did you hear that Dominguez?"

"We're rolling, Doc—better hold on," Killer shouted, gunning the heavy ambulance into a leap like a jackrabbit. Sam knew what was coming and caught Nita around the waist before she fell. Killer threw the switch and the rear door

closed while they raced ahead. "That thing is really a monster," he said.

The ambulance curved in an arc around the base of the *Pericles* like a bug circling a tree, keeping clear of the churned up soil and buckled slabs of concrete that were still smoking from the landing. The Jupiter rocket was shaped like a squat artillery shell with the rounded swellings of rocket tubes about its base. It was built of incredibly thick metal, they could tell this by the metre-deep holes that had been gouged in the sides without penetrating, and it was grooved, scarred and pitted like a piece of furnace slag. They could only stare at the great bulk in silence while they swept out and around it.

"There's the plane ahead," Sam shouted, and Killer stood on the brakes.

They saw at first glance that there was very little they could do, nevertheless they tried. The small jet had been flipped onto its back and crushed, then burned into a twisted and blackened ruin. Sam managed to pry the side door partly open and one look at the charred bodies inside was enough.

"We better get back," he said. "They may need our help." He put his hand under Nita's arm, ostensibly to steady her over the broken ground, but he had seen her face go white.

"I—I don't know if I can be of any help," she said. "I never practised after I took my degree, I've been in research, in the lab . . ."

"It's just like school—you'll be all right. It hits us all like this the first time, but you'll find your hands automatically doing all the things that you have learned. And I'll bet that you're a good doctor."

"Thank you," she said, some of the colour coming back. "For helping. I didn't mean to make a fool of myself."

"You're not a fool, Nita. There's nothing to be ashamed of in not enjoying the sight of sudden death, particularly as drastic as that . . ."

"LOOK!" Killer shouted, "Up there!"

There was a squealing from the side of the ship, about twenty feet above the ground, and bits of metal flaked down. A circle appeared and a portion of the ship ten feet in diameter began to revolve like a giant plug.

"It's the airlock," Sam said. "They're coming out."

TWO

From the other side of the mountainous ship there came the distant rumble of engines, an occasional shout and the clank of heavy machinery, but the sounds were dwarfed by the bulk of the spacer. Other than this an unnatural quiet hung over the airport, an oppressive silence, undoubtedly the first time in years without the scream of jets or roaring of propellers. A flock of starlings settled onto the nearby, churned up earth, pecking at the suddenly exposed insect life. Overhead a gull drifted in from the nearby ocean on motionless wings, only its head turning quickly, trying to see if the starlings had discovered anything edible. It dipped a sudden wingtip in alarm and swooped away as metal squealed on metal and the great weight of the outer door of the airlock swung free.

"Unload the surgical and medical kits, Killer," Sam ordered, "Then get around to the police and tell them what has happened. Fast!"

The sound of the ambulance died away and the thin whine of an electric motor could be heard inside the ship, growing louder as the massive door, now free of the threads, swung out on its central pivot. As soon as the opening was large enough a jointed metal ladder dropped down, unrolling as it fell, stopping almost at their feet. A man appeared in the opening above them and dangled his legs over the edge, groping for the rungs with his toes, then began a slow and painful descent.

"Is anything wrong?" Sam shouted up to him. "Can we help you?" There was no answer, just the hesitant motion of the man's arms and legs. "I better climb up there and help him down . . ."

"He's falling!" Nita screamed.

Ten feet above the ground the spaceman's hands seemed to lose their strength, they could not hold on. He fell, twisting in the air, landing on his side. The two doctors ran to him.

"Easy," Sam said, "Free his arm while I roll him onto his back. Careful with it, I think it's fractured."

"Look at his face! What is that . . .?"

The man's skin was pale and covered with swollen red

nodules as large as walnuts, some of them were ruptured and suppurating. The same boils were visible at the open neck of his grey space-jumper and on the backs of his hands.

"Furunculosis of some kind," Sam said slowly. "Though I've never seen anything quite like it before. You don't think—"

He didn't finish the sentence, but Nita's gasp ended it for him. When he raised his head he found himself looking into her widened eyes and saw there the fear that he knew must be mirrored in his own.

"Topholm's pachyacria," she said so softly he could barely hear it.

"It might be something like that, we can't be sure—but we'll still have to take every precaution." He remembered what had happened then.

The bacteria that had infected Lieutenant Topholm during the stay of the first expedition on Venus had not produced any symptoms until after the return to Earth. There had not been an epidemic, yet a great number of people had died and there were still men whose feet and hands had to be amputated who could attest to the virulency of the disease. Since that time the quarantine of space ships had become more strict to avoid any recurrence of alien infection.

Sam was galvanized into sudden motion by the sound of approaching engines, he jumped to his feet and ran towards the returning ambulance that was being followed by two police cars.

"Stop!" he shouted, standing directly in their path with his arms raised. Brakes squealed as they halted and the police started to climb out. "No—don't come any closer. It would be better if you backed off at least fifty yards. A man came out of the ship, and he's sick. He's going into tight quarantine at once and only Dr. Mendel and myself will remain close to him."

"You heard the doctor, get them back," the police captain said hoarsely. The two cars backed up but the ambulance didn't move.

"I can help you, Doc," Killer asked casually enough, though his face was drained of blood.

"Thanks, Killer, but Dr. Mendel and I can handle this. No one else is going to get exposed until we find out what is

wrong with the man. I want you to get back there with the others, then call the hospital and report exactly what has happened so that they can contact public health. I'm bringing the man in—unless they order otherwise—and if I do we'll need the tight quarantine ward. Then seal off your cab and make sure that your gas closures are screwed down tight. Let me know as soon as you hear anything. Move!"

"You're the doctor—doctor," he managed a crooked smile and began backing up.

Nita had both medical kits open and was strapping a recording telltale to the spaceman's wrist. "The radius seems to be fractured," she said without looking up when she heard his footsteps approaching. "Respiration shallow, temperature 105. He's still unconscious."

He kneeled next to her. "You can move away and I'll take over—there's no point in having both of us exposed, Nita."

"Don't be foolish, I'm as exposed by now as I'll ever be. But that doesn't matter—I'm still a physician."

"Thanks." His worried face broke into a smile for a brief second. "I can use your help . . ."

The sick man's eyes were open and he made a muffled gargled noise deep in his throat. Sam gently opened the spacemen's jaw with a tongue depressor and examined the inside of his mouth. "Parrot tongue," he said, looking at the characteristic dry, horny surface produced by severe fever. "And the mucous membranes in the throat seem to be swollen as well." The man's eyes were fixed on his face as the throat contracted with effort. "Don't try to talk, you can't with a throat like that . . ."

"Sam—look at his fingers, he's moving them as if he were writing. He wants to tell us something!"

Sam pushed a heavy marking pen into the man's hand and held the clipboard up so that he could write. The fingers moved clumsily, leaving a shaking mark: he used his left hand and he was probably right handed—but his right arm was broken. With a tremendous effort he scrawled the twisting lines onto the paper, but collapsed, unconscious again, before he could finish. Sam eased him slowly back to the ground.

"It says SICK," Nita said, "Then, it looks like INCH—no it's IN, then SHIP. *Sick in ship*—is that what he meant to write?"

"Sick in ship . . . sickness in the spaceship. He may have been trying to warn us of infection there—or tell us that there were others in there. I'll have to go see."

Nita started to say something—then stopped and looked down at the telltale. "His condition hasn't changed, but he should be in the hospital."

"We can't move him until we have orders from the public health people, so make him as comfortable as possible. Don't try to set his arm, but do put the supporting brace on it. I'm going to look into the ship. Put on isolation gloves before you touch him any more, that will lessen the hazard of accidental infection from those suppurating boils. I'll do the same thing myself before I climb the ladder."

The gloves, really elbow-length gauntlets, were made of thin but very tough plastic, and they each pulled on a pair while he inserted filter plugs into his nostrils. Sam slung the medical kit over his shoulder by the carrying strap and quickly climbed the hanging ladder. When he clambered through the threaded, circular opening he found himself in a metal, box-like room as wide as it was high and featureless except for a large door on the far wall flanked by a telephone unit. It was obviously a spacelock, and the inner door should lead into the ship. A control panel was set next to it and Sam pressed the button labelled CYCLE OPEN.

Nothing happened, the controls were dead and the inner door was sealed. Sam tried all the buttons, but there was no response. He turned to the telephone and found a list of numbers mounted next to the screen. There was the ping of a bell when he dialled 211 for the control room and the screen came to life.

"Hello, is there anyone there? I'm calling from the airlock."

An empty acceleration couch almost filled the screen and behind it, out of focus, were banked racks of instruments. There was no answer, nor did he see any movement. Sam dialled the engine room next, with the same negative result. After this he went to the top of the list and dialled every number on it, one by one, hearing his voice echo in compartment after compartment. There was no answer. They were all empty. The sick man must have been alone in the ship.

When Sam started back down the ladder he saw that more cars had arrived, but all of them were keeping their distance.

A policemen started forward from one of the cars and at the same time an amplified voice boomed out.

"Dr. Bertolli, your hospital wants to talk to you. The officer is bringing you a portable telephone, would you please pick it up."

Sam waved that he heard and, after setting down the medical kit, went to pick up the phone where it had been left midway between the spaceship and the cars. "How is the patient?" he asked Nita when he returned.

"He seems to be losing ground, pulse weaker, breathing shallower and his temperature is still high. Do you think he should have an antipyretic, or antibiotics—?"

"Let me talk to the hospital first."

An image appeared on the small screen when he switched it on, divided in two for a conference call. On one side was a heavysset, grey haired man whom he had never seen before, on the other was the worried face of Dr. McKay, the head of the Department of Tropical Medicine and former head of the team who had developed the treatment of Topholm's pachyacria.

"We've heard about the man from the ship, Dr. Bertolli," McKay said. "This is Professor Chabel from World Health. Could we see the patient, please?"

"Of course, doctor." Sam held the phone so that the pickup was focused on the unconscious spacemen and at the same time gave the readings from the telltale and described what he had found on the ship, then showed the message the space-man has written.

"Are you positive that no one else is in the ship?" Chabel asked.

"I'm not positive, because I couldn't get in. But I called every department that had a phone, no one answered my calls nor did I see anyone—alive or dead—in any of these compartments."

"You said that you couldn't operate the spacelock controls."

"The power was off, they seemed to be deactivated."

"That's good enough for me," Chabel said, coming to a decision. "The controls worked when the man came out, so he must have turned them off himself. That, along with his warning about sickness in the ship, is enough reason to act. I'm going to quarantine that spaceship at once and have it

sealed and sterilized on the outside. It's going to be isolated and no one will go near it until we find out what the disease is."

"Bring him to the hospital," Dr. McKay said. "All the patients in the tight quarantine ward have been transferred to other hospitals."

"Should I administer any treatment first?"

"Yes, our experience has been that normal supportive treatment is recommended. Even if the disease is an alien one it can only affect the patient's body in a limited number of ways. I would suggest antipyrine acetylsalicylate to bring the fever down, and a broad spectrum antibiotic."

"Megacillin?"

"Fine."

"We'll leave in a few minutes."

Nita was already preparing the injections when he hung up. They were done quickly while the ambulance backed towards them, the rear door gaping open. The first vertijets appeared as Sam was rolling out the stretcher, they must have already been on their way during the phone call and were just waiting for the go-ahead signal from World Health. There were two of them that circled the spaceship slowly, then vanished behind its bulk. A bellowing roar broke out and clouds of dense black smoke appeared.

"What's happening?" Nita asked.

"Flame throwers, they'll cover every inch of the ship with them and the ground around. Every precaution must be taken to see that the infection isn't spread."

When Sam turned to latch the door he saw the starling on the ground nearby, dragging its wing in circles. Human beings weren't the only ones who had suffered when the *Pericles* landed, the bird must have been hit by a piece of flying debris. And there was another bird, injured too, lying on its side with its beak open.

THREE

Killer outdid himself. He knew that the patient was desperately ill and that the sooner he was in the hospital where all its complex facilities could be marshalled to aid him the better his chances were—but this circumstance was only the

trigger. As the ambulance's turbine whined up to speed he saw that the police had opened a lane for him directly to the highway which had been completely cleared of all traffic. When the speedometer hit one hundred he kicked in the overdrive and kept his foot on the floor, screaming the heavy machine down the centre of the concrete roadway. Green and white police copters paced him on both sides and another copter dropped down between them: sunlight glinted from a lens in the side window and he knew that the scene was going out on television to the world, they were watching *him*. He gripped the wheel tighter as they hit the turn at Flushing Meadows, keeping speed and turning sharply so that they broadsided into it, skidding sideways through the arc of road and leaving long streaks of black rubber on the white surface. Television!

In the rear of the ambulance the man from space was dying. The antipyretic was controlling his temperature, but his pulse was fluttering and growing steadily weaker. Sam turned the UV light on to the patient's chest but the furunculosis made it impossible to read the medical history invisibly tattooed there.

"Isn't there something else we can do?" Nita asked helplessly.

"Not now, we've done all we can until we know more about the mechanism of this disease." He looked at her strained face and twisting fingers: she was not used to the dark presence of approaching death. "Wait, there is something we can do—and you'll do it much better than I could." He pulled over one of the equipment boxes and unlatched the lid. "Your pathology department will want blood and sputum samples, you might even prepare slides from those suppurating boils."

"Of course," she said, straightening up. "I can do it now and save that much time after we get to the hospital." While she spoke she was laying out the equipment with automatic efficiency. Sam made no attempt to help since right now work was the best therapy for her. He leaned back on the bench, swaying with the motion of the hurtling ambulance, the only sounds in the insulated compartment the hoarse breathing of the patient and the sighing of the air filters.

When Nita finished taking her samples he snapped the

oxygen tent over the stretcher, sealing it tight and putting a filter over the exhaust outlet.

"This will cut down the chance of contamination, and the increased oxygen tension should ease the load on his heart."

The hydraulic motors hummed briefly and the rear door swung wide onto the empty silent receiving platform. "I can give you a hand with the stretcher, Doc," Killer said over the intercom.

"There's no need, Killer, Dr. Mendel and I can do it ourselves. I want you to stay in the cab until the decon team is finished with the ambulance. And that's an order."

"I always do what the doctor says—" his voice cut off as the circuit clicked open.

Sam wheeled the stretcher towards the elevator while Nita watched the patient. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw the waiting technicians in sealed plastic suits carrying spray tanks on their backs. One of them lifted his hand briefly and Sam realised that McKay himself was leading the team, the head of the Department of Tropical Medicine decontaminating an ambulance.

"This elevator is on remote," a voice said from a speaker in the wall when they had pushed the stretcher in. The door closed behind them, then opened again on the sixtieth floor. The corridor was also empty and all of the doors were shut and sealed, waiting for the decon men to follow them up. Ahead of them the first of the thick, vault-type doors of the tight quarantine ward swung open, then sealed itself behind them. The inner door opened.

"Onto the bed first, then get those samples through to the lab," Sam said, and recognized a tone of relief in his voice. The man was still his patient, but the physicians in the hospital would soon be monitoring the case and advising him. Guiltily, he realized that his relief came from the sharing of responsibility: If the patient were to die now the blame would not be all his.

While Nita sealed the samples into the delivery capsule for the lab he took the telltale instruments that were waiting on the bedside table and he attached them one by one. The sphygmomanometer and thermometer were combined in a black instrument no larger than a poker chip. He fixed it to the unconscious man's wrist with surgical glue and it began

transmitting at once as the internal thermal switch turned on. It was self-powered and its microminiaturized transmitter broadcast to an aerial in the frame of the bed; Sam checked its operation on the inset monitor screen. Bad, very bad. Connecting the electrocardiograph and the electroencephalograph was more exacting, but he did it swiftly, then the pH and serum analyzer. All of the information, besides being displayed on the monitor screen, was appearing on the screen in the consultation room. Sam clasped his hands tightly, unconsciously, waiting for the report.

The call signal pinged and Dr. Gaspard's face swam into focus on the telephone screen.

"No diagnosis yet, Dr. Bertolli," he said, "Other than our agreement that the disease appears to be completely unknown. There is one thing, the patient has been identified by the Space Commission as Commander Rand, Second Officer of the *Pericles*. His medical history will be on your monitor screen in a moment, it's just coming in from their record section."

"Are there any suggestions for treatment?"

"Just supportive as you have been doing—"

He broke off as the alarm sounded from the monitor screen where a pulsing red light now glowed over the ECG reading.

"Fibrillation!" Gaspard said, but Sam had already torn open the cabinet drawer and removed the coronary stimulator. Weakened by disease and strain, Rand's heart was running wild as the muscles contracted in uncontrolled spasms, no longer pumping blood but shuddering like a dying animal.

Once, twice the strong electrical current penetrated the convulsive heart muscles, stopping the uncontrolled tremors. Then, slowly, it began to beat again and Sam turned back to the instrument cabinet. Nita was already there, taking out the cardiac pacemaker.

"You're sure to need this," she said, and he nodded agreement. As he made the incision in Rand's heaving chest to connect the terminals fibrillation began again. This time he made no attempt to restart the weakened heart by shocking it, but raced to make the connections to the pacemaker.

"Power on!" he said, looking at the waxey skin of the unconscious man. Behind him the life-giving machine hummed

quietly, sending out the carefully spaced micro-currents that duplicated the nerve signals that were no longer reaching the damaged heart. It began to beat again, timed by the artificial stimulation, and blood once more surged through Rand's arteries.

This was the beginning of the end, from this point onward the spaceman's life slipped away from him and he never regained consciousness. It was two hours before he died—officially died—but it was clear all this time that there could be no hope for recovery. Only a miracle could have saved him and the watching physicans neither expected nor received this. Sam, with Nita assisting, laboured with all the machines and drugs available to them, but it was useless. The antibiotics had no effect on whatever organism was causing the disease and it spread through the entire system with frightening speed. From the symptoms many—or indeed all—of the man's organs seemed to be affected and renal failure and necrosis pushed him closer to that invisible border. Sam was not looking at the monitor screen so that he missed the moment and did not know it had arrived until Dr. Gaspard's weary voice caught his attention.

"There is no longer a reading on the EEG, doctor. Thank you, you and Dr. Mendel have done everything possible. I don't think—it is clear now—that from the very beginning there was really very little that could have been done."

The screen went blank. Sam slowly, one by one, turned off the battery of machines that had by heroic measures been producing a simulation of life, then stared down at the dead man. For long seconds he stood like this before he was aware of what he was doing, aware enough to force himself to think, to take the next steps. The patient was dead. Finis. Now to the living.

"There's nothing more we can do here," he said to Nita holding her arm and drawing her away from the bed. She would not take her eyes from the dead man's face until he pulled the sheet over it.

"Into the decon chamber, doctor," he said. "All of your clothes, everything including shoes and underclothing, goes into the incineration hopper, than a complete scrub. The directions are on the wall if you haven't done it before."

She walked towards the door slowly stripping off the gauntlet-length isolation gloves, then stopped.

"No, you've handled him the most—you should go before I . . ."

"I have some things to do first," he said, urging her on. This time she did not protest.

By the time Nita emerged from the decon chamber wearing a sterile surgical gown and cotton scuffs the room had changed. The bed had been stripped and even the mattress removed. There was no sign of the body until Sam pointed to the square stainless steel door set into the wall.

"Orders, he's in there. It's not an ordinary morgue setup, if needed it can be chilled by liquid nitrogen. This will make dissection more difficult but that was the decision upstairs. But of course—you work in pathology, you must know all about this. Will you take over please, while I scrub? The last word from the council upstairs was that we were just to stand by here until we had further instructions.

Nita dropped into the chair, without the pressure of responsibility she was suddenly aware of how tired she was. She was still sitting there when Ben came out and he went over to the equipment cabinet, sliding open drawers until he found the recording telltales.

"We should have done this earlier because if we are going to catch . . . anything we'll want to know about it as soon as possible." She fastened one to her wrist as he went into the pharmacy and began rummaging through the shelves. "I'm filling a prescription, doctor," he called out and held up a bottle of clear fluid. "Do you know what this is?"

" C_2H_5OH ."

"Ethyl alcohol, correct, I see we both went to the same school. There are many formulas for the preparation of this universal solvent but considering the patients'—our need of instant medication I favour the simplest and most effective."

"Sub-cranial injection?"

"Not quite so drastic."

He had extracted a container of orange juice from the kitchen refrigerator and was mixing it half and half with the alcohol: then he poured two healthy beakers full. They smiled and drank and neither of them glanced at the shining door in the wall though it was foremost in their minds.

Instead they sat by the window and looked out over the towers of the city: it was dusk and the lights were coming on while behind the dark spires of the buildings the sky was washed with sweeps of red, verging into purple in the east.

"There's something I should have remembered," Sam said, staring unseeingly at the darkening sky.

"What do you mean? There's nothing more we could have done—"

"No it has nothing to do with poor Rand, at least not directly. It was something at the ship, just before we left."

"I don't recall anything, we were alone, then the vertijets came just as we left—"

"That's it, something to do with them!" He turned so suddenly his drink sloshed onto the floor but he didn't notice it. "No not the copters—the birds, don't you remember the birds?"

"I'm sorry . . ."

"They were on the ground near the ship, I saw them just before I closed the ambulance door. Starlings. There were a few of them that appeared to be injured in some way, I remember at the time I thought they had been hurt when the ship landed—but that's not possible. They weren't there when we came, don't you remember that? They settled down after we stopped the ambulance." He was running to the phone while he was still speaking, thumbing it into life.

Dr. Chabel was in conference but broke off at once to take Sam's call. He listened silently while Sam told him about the birds and worried cleft between his eyes deepened.

"No, Dr. Bertolli, I have no report on these birds. Do you think there is a connection . . .?"

"I hope not."

"The ship has been cordoned off and is being guarded. I'll have men in isolation suits go in there and see if they can find anything. You'll get the report of whatever they discover. In the meantime—will you hold on for a moment . . .?" Dr. Chabel turned away from the phone and had a brief conversation with someone out of range of the pickup. When he came back on the screen he was holding a sheaf of photographs in his hands.

"These are from the electron microscope, prints are on the way to you as well. What appears to be the infectious

agent has been isolated, a virus, in many ways it resembles *Borrelia variolae*."

"Smallpox! But the symptoms—"

"We realize that, different in every way. I said it is just a physical resemblance, in reality the virus is unlike anything I have ever seen before. In the light of this I would like to ask you and Dr. Mendel to aid me."

Nita had come up silently behind Sam and was listening in; she answered for both of them.

"Anything we can do we will, of course Dr. Chabel."

"You will both be in quarantine there for an unlimited time, until we can learn more about the nature of this disease. And you have the body of Commander Rand there . . ."

"Would you like us to perform the post mortem?" Sam asked. "It would lessen the risk of moving the body and exposing others."

"It is really a job for World Health, but in the circumstances . . ."

"We will be very glad to do it, Dr. Chabel. There is very little else that we can do in quarantine. Will you want to record?"

"Yes, we will have the pickups on remote, and we will take the entire process. And we will want specimens of all the tissues for biopsy."

Even with the ultrasonic knives dissection of the frozen body was difficult. And depressing. It was obvious from the very beginning that Rand's life could never have been saved since his body was riddled by the pockets of infection, there were large cysts in every organ. Sam did the gross dissection and Nita prepared slides and cultures for the waiting technicians, sending them out in sealed containers through the evacuated tube system with its automatic sterilization stage.

There was only one interruption, when Dr. Chabel reported that the dead birds—an entire flock of starlings and seagull—had been found near the ship. The bodies were being taken to the World Health laboratories for examination.

It was midnight before they were finished and all of the equipment was sterilized. Nita came out of the decontamination chamber, her still-wet hair up in a towel, to find Ben looking at a photographic print. He held it out to her.

"This just came in from World Health, from their lab. Those dead birds filled with cysts—"

"No!"

"—and this is what the virus looks like. It appears to be identical with the one that killed Rand."

She took it and wearily dropped into the couch under the window. In the thin cotton gown, it barely came to her knees when she tucked her legs up beside her, and with her face scrubbed clean of makeup she was a very attractive woman with very little of the doctor left. "Does it mean . . . ?" she asked fearfully and couldn't finish the sentence.

"We don't know what it means yet." He was very tired and knew she must be feeling even worse. "There are a lot of questions here that are badly in need of answers. Why did the ship stay so long on Jupiter—and why did Commander Rand return alone? How did he contract this disease—and does it have any connection with the birds? There has to be a connection, but I can't see it. If the disease is so virulent—the birds must have died within minutes of contracting it—how is it that, well, we haven't been stricken yet." He was sorry the instant he said this, but the words were out. Nita had her head lowered and her eyes closed and he realized they were filled with silent tears that welled out on her face. Without reasoned thought he took her hand in his, it was human need in the face of oncoming darkness, and she clutched it tightly. She settled back onto the couch and the photograph dropped from her fingers and slid to the floor: he realised suddenly that she was asleep.

There were plenty of blankets and he made no attempt to move her, but he did put a pillow under her head so that she could rest comfortably and covered her with a blanket. He was exhausted, though not sleepy, so he turned off the overhead lights and lay back on one of the beds with another glass of ethyl-orange juice. What was this plague from space? His thoughts chased themselves in circles and he must have dozed off because the next thing he noticed was the sunlight coming in through the window over the empty couch. It was going to be another warm day. He glanced quickly at his telltale—it registered normal.

"Going to sleep forever?" Nita asked from the diet kitchen where she was making dish-rattling noises. "It's six-thirty already." She brought him a cup of coffee and he saw that

she had her hair combed and tied back and had applied a touch of lipstick; she looked as bright as the new day.

"I was going to call the World Health lab, but decided to wait until you woke up," she said, and turned to the phone. He stopped her.

"Not yet. The news can wait until after breakfast—if there is *breakfast* that is . . ."

"A delicious home cooked, handmade breakfast of farm sausages and new laid eggs—it's defrosting right now."

"Show me where it is!"

There was an unspoken agreement that they would hold the world at bay for just a little while longer, enjoying the breakfast in the early sunlight that poured across the room. Until they touched the phone they were cut off and alone in these sealed rooms high above the city, in a private universe of their own. She poured more coffee and they sipped it slowly looking out at the clear sky and sharp-edged, reaching towers of New York.

"Are you from here, from the city?" Nita asked. He nodded.

"Born, bred and abided here ever since, except for the nine years in the UN Army."

"Nine years! I thought that you looked, well . . . a little . . ." she broke off, a little unsure of herself, and he laughed.

"I look a little old to be an intern? Well you're perfectly right."

"I didn't mean to . . ."

"Please, Nita—if I was ever sensitive about the fact that I was ten years older than all my fellow students in medical school I've long since developed a thick hide. Neither am I ashamed of the time I put in the army, I wanted to make it my career and I was a captain before I finally decided to leave."

"Was there a—particular reason for the decision?"

"One perhaps, but the idea was a long time growing. My best friend then was Tom, our medical officer, and little by little I began to have the feeling that there was more sense to his job than to mine. He never propagandized me but he answered all my stupid questions and let me stand around and watch when he was operating. What finally decided me was what happened in that village in Tibet; we had airdropped in during the night to get between the Indians and the Chinese.

I had never seen poverty or disease like that and I wondered why guns were the only thing we could bring them . . ."

The wasp-like buzz of the phone cut across his words and he turned quickly to the kitchen extension and turned it on. Dr. McKay's face swam into focus on the screen. His Department of Tropical Medicine must have worked through the night and it was apparent from the dark shadows under his eyes that he had worked along with them. He was brusque.

"How are you both feeling? Have there been symptoms of any kind?"

Sam glanced at the dials of his own telltale, then at Nita's. "All readings are normal and there are no symptoms. Have there been other cases—?"

"No, we've had none, I was just concerned since you both had been exposed." He closed his eyes for a moment and rubbed at his knotted forehead. "So far there have been no other cases of what is now unofficially known as Rand's disease, at least not among human beings."

"The birds?"

"Yes, we've had men out with lights all night, and since dawn there have been more reports, a plague of birds, dead birds. World Health has already broadcast a warning that ill or dead birds are not to be touched and that the police should be notified at once."

"Have any other animals been affected?" Nita asked.

"No, nothing else so far, just the birds, for which we are very grateful. And you two, no symptoms at all, that is very hopeful. That is why you must stay in touch with me, let me know at once if there is anything, well, out of the ordinary. Good luck." He rang off.

Nita sipped at her coffee. "It's cooled off—I'll have to heat some more." She slid two sealed containers into the radar oven. "Everything about this disease is strange, it doesn't fit any of the rules."

"Well should it, Nita? After all it is a disease from space, from another world, and it should be expected to be alien."

"New but not alien. No matter what an organism is it can only affect the body in a limited number of ways. If the disease were really alien it would have no affect on human beings—if it were, say, a fungus that attacked only silicon based life . . ."

"Or a bacteria that was only viable at 20 below zero."

"Right! The disease Rand returned with is entirely new to us, but its reactions aren't. Fever, nephrosis, furunculosis and pyemia. Admittedly the infection was spread through his entire body, but there are other diseases that attack a number of organs simultaneously, so it is just the combination of these factors that is new."

Sam took the hot container she passed him and filled his cup. "You make it sound hopeful, I had visions of a plague from space sweeping around the world." Then he frowned in sudden memory. "What about the birds—how do you fit them in?"

"We don't know if they do fit in yet. They might have the same disease—or something like it. If they do have a related disease it will be a great aid if anyone else does come down with the virus that killed Rand. We'll be able to manufacture vaccine then, if we can't come up with a foolproof drug cure first. I wish I could see how the work in the labs is coming."

"I do too—but we better resign ourselves to staying here awhile. You're the pathologist so you'll have plenty to keep you busy with those tissue samples. But there is very little work here for an ambulance riding intern. I think I'll get on the phone and call a few friends around the hospital, try and find out what is going on in the world outside."

Nita was busy all morning in the small but complete laboratory that was an integral part of the isolation ward. She was vaguely aware of Sam's phone conversations and the hissing-chunk of the tube capsules arriving. When she finally took a break near noon she found him bent over a map that he had spread out on the table.

"Come look," he said, waving her over. "This is all of Long Island—Kennedy Airport is here—and I have had the World Health people sending me over copies of all their reports on dead birds. I've entered the location on the map for each report and noted the number of birds found on the site at well. Do you see a pattern?"

Nita ran her fingers over the tiny, red inked numbers. "At first look almost all of them are along the south shore, with a number of dense patches in Cederhurst, Lawrence and Long Beach."

"Yes, they have been found only on the south shore so far,

you can see that here in Reynold's Channel next to Long Beach they recovered over two thousand dead ducks. Now, did you happen to notice which way the air lock on the *Pericles* was facing when it opened?"

"No, I was all turned around, I can't be sure."

"I wasn't certain either, so I checked with the airport. The open port faces almost exactly east southeast—like this." He took a parallel ruler and laid it across the compass rose, then moved it to intercept the corner of the airport where the grounded spaceship lay. He slashed a red line from the airport across Long Island and into the ocean. When he lifted the ruler Nita gasped.

"It goes right through Long Beach, through the centre of most of the numbers. But it just *can't* be like that—unless the wind was blowing that way?"

"Almost no wind yesterday you'll remember, occasional gusts up to two miles an hour at that time, but nondirectional."

"Are you trying to tell me that the virus that infected these birds came out of that port like a . . . *searchlight beam* and just swept across the country infecting everything in the way?"

"I'm not telling you anything, Nita—you seem to be telling me. I've just transcribed the figures furnished by the police. Maybe the virus was spread as you said, we might be wrong in thinking that an alien organism would have to conform to our rules of behaviour. So far nothing in this whole affair fits the rules." He paced the floor, unconsciously slamming his fist into the palm of his other hand.

"And while its going on I'm trapped in here. If Rand's disease only attacks birds they could hold us here for the rest of our lives, under observation, never sure but still waiting for us to get sick . . ." The phone signal cut him off.

It was Chabel from World Health. He had a haunted look and when he spoke his voice was pitched so low that it was barely audible.

"There is a patient on the way up, Dr. Bertolli, please be ready to receive him."

"You mean—"

"Yes. Rand's disease. A policemen. He is one of the men who were assigned to collecting the dead birds."

FOUR

Nita prepared the bed while Sam waited impatiently for the inner door to open. The indicator light blinked off signalling that the outer door was closed, then the hidden motors hummed and air hissed by the seals before him and, as soon as the inner door had opened wide enough, he squeezed through. The policeman on the wheeled stretcher—still in uniform—was sitting up on his elbows.

"I don't know what I'm doing here, Doc, I'm not that sick, a touch of fever, a summer cold, you know, this time of year," he said it calmly, quietly, as though trying to reassure himself. There were red, suffused patches on his face that could be developing boils. Sam took up the record holder. Francis Miles, age thirty-eight, occupation: police officer, all typed in very neatly, but scrawled across the lower half of the page in large letters was **RAND'S DISEASE VIRUS: POSITIVE.**

"Well that's what you're here for, Frank, so we can find out," Sam said, putting the records back without changing his expression. "Now lie back so you don't roll off and we'll see about getting you to bed." He pushed the stretcher into the tight quarantine ward and the massive door swung behind them.

Nita was cheerful and fluffed the policeman's pillow, produced a menu for him to study, saying that he looked hungry, and even found a bottle of beer that had been tucked away in the back of the refrigerator. Sam worked swiftly attaching the telltales to the patient's dry, hot skin and it took him almost fifteen minutes to get them all accurately placed and recording to his satisfaction. In that time the patient's fever went up a full degree. The first boils were already beginning to form when he closed the door of the office and dialled Dr. McKay's number, touching in sequence the dimpled numbers of the induction dial.

"We've been monitoring your pickups," McKay said.

"Are there any recommendations for treatment?"

"They are under discussion—"

"But you must have suggestions?" Sam clenched his fists, keeping his temper under control.

"There is some difference of opinion. Supportive treatment

appeared to have been ineffective with the last case, but it has been suggested that in combination with interferon it might be more effective and a supply is on the way to you now. However hyperbaric oxygen therapy has been successful with related . . ."

"Dr. McKay," Sam broke in, "there is no hyperbaric chamber here, so treatment would mean moving the patient again. You must understand—the instruments can't tell you everything—this man is dying before my eyes. I've never seen a disease progress with the speed of this one. Have you?"

McKay shook his head with a weary no and Sam leaned closer to the phone.

"Do I have your permission to begin supportive treatment with interferon and antibiotics to stop any secondary infections? I must do *something*!"

"Yes, of course Dr. Bertolli, after all he is your patient and I quite agree with your decision. I'll notify the committee of what has been done."

When Sam hung up he found that Nita was standing behind him.

"Did you hear that?" he asked.

"Yes, you did the only thing. They can't possibly understand without seeing the patient. I had to give him some Surital, 6 cc, he was getting excited, almost hysterical, is that all right?"

"It has to be correct because anything we do now is dictated by the patient's needs. Let's see if the interferon has come yet."

The capsule was waiting in the receiving basket and Sam quickly prepared the injection while Nita swabbed the patient's arm. He was lying on his back, his eyes were closed and he was breathing heavily through his mouth. His skin was spotted with the angry red swellings of the boils. Sam gave him a large intravenous injection, the blood stream would carry the interferon to every part of the body, then injected one of the furuncles with a smaller dose.

"We can use that for control," he said, ringing the injection site with an iodine marking. "Interferon applied locally is always more effective. In combination with the antipyretic we may get some positive results."

There was no dramatic improvement after this, though the policeman's temperature did drop two degrees. McKay and

his group monitored everything and suggested variations in treatment. The burly policeman was Sam's patient and he resented their attitude, that the man was a sort of giant guinea pig, though he made no protests. The policeman *was* a guinea pig, if he could be cured the treatment would be available for others.

And there were other cases. They were being routed to New York Hospital where a special sealed ward, far bigger than this experimental one, had been evacuated and staffed with volunteers. It was difficult to learn how many there were, even the official medical reports were reticent with the facts, while the tv and radio bulletins were obviously stop-gap morale builders. Sam had his patient to care for or he would have seethed with frustration at being trapped in the ward while a plague might be growing in the city outside.

"What is that for?" he asked when he saw Nita removing a wire basket of pigeons from the tube capsule. He had been aware of her working in the lab during the past hours, though he hadn't talked to her. She brushed a strand of russet hair away from her eyes and pointed to the desk.

"I have been reading reports all day from the laboratories that are working on the Rand virus and there is one experiment that they haven't performed yet, that would be safest to do here in tight quarantine where we have a patient ill with Rand's disease."

"What experiment is that?"

She shuffled through the papers and pulled one out. "Here is the first report from pathology. It has been found impossible to infect human tissue in vitro with infected cells from Commander Rand. They tried this before he died last night. They also found out that they couldn't pass the virus on to any of the lab animals, monkeys, guinea pigs, rabbits . . ."

"Then—if it can't be passed on you and I can leave quarantine! But how could this policeman have been infected?"

"Just a moment and you'll see. The Rand virus can infect birds, it has taken hold on every species they have tried so far. And then, this is the worst part, the diseased cells from the birds can infect human cells, that's how poor Frank caught it."

"Have they tried this on a human volunteer?"

"No, of course not! Just on resected tissue in vitro and HeLa cells."

Sam was pacing back and forth, unable to stand still.

"It's like the life cycle in schistosomiasis—from man to snail to man—but that's a blood fluke, there is no record of a virus propagating this way. Not this one-to-one business with man infecting birds then birds infecting man right back, but no cross infection within the species—wait, can the birds infect one another?"

"Yes, that's been proven."

"Then—of course—there's the next step, that's why you have the birds here. You want to find out if the human virus will reinfect the birds. If it does, then that means that Frank here and Rand both had the same disease. If they did, once we break the chain of infection it can be wiped out."

Nita had the hypodermic ready. She reached into the cage and caught one of the birds deftly so that it could not move. It cooed lightly and blinked its pink eyes when the needle slid under its skin: Nita slipped it into another cage and put it into a sealed compartment.

"There's one thing missing," Sam said. "Will the virus from the sick policeman infect other human cells, perhaps it has been changed even more by passing through the birds?"

"No, I've already checked that. I'm not set up for it here, but I sent samples of biopyoculture from the abscesses down to the sixth floor, they found they didn't infect human tissue."

Sam went to inspect his patient who was sleeping quietly. There was no change, the spread of the disease seemed to have been checked, at least temporarily, though the fever had not gone down. He went back to the lab and sat down across the desk from Nita who was making notes on a clipboard.

"The lab is beginning to call them Rand-alpha and Rand-beta," she said, "I suppose that will become the official name."

"What's the distinction?"

"Rand-alpha is what Commander Rand had, a deadly virus that cannot be transmitted to man or to any animals other than birds. Rand-beta is the apparently identical virus, it kills the birds and it can be transmitted to man."

"And it can infect other birds."

"Yes, very easily, that's how it spread so quickly."

"Then the thing to find out now is if Rand-beta when transmitted to man becomes Rand-alpha. If it does our troubles are over. It will mean killing a lot of birds, but we can stop the disease at that stage and stop it from reinfecting human beings."

"That's what I'm hoping," she said, looking at the instruments attached to the bird's cage. "If the bird gets sick it will have Rand-beta, which means your patient has Rand-alpha—the same as the original case. It will prove that there are only two forms of the disease—and it can only be caught from birds. Once their reservoir of infection is wiped out that will be the end of it."

They both looked up as the pigeon, stretching out one wing, rolled onto its side.

"It's body temperature has gone up four degrees," Nita said.

The first boil formed and they saw that disease was following the now all too familiar course.

"I'll get a blood specimen down to the lab," Nita said, "to be checked with the electron microscope. But I don't think there is any doubt, do you?"

"None at all," he said as he took a hypodermic needle from the autoclave. "There is only one factor missing from the whole series to prove whether it's right or wrong." He turned towards the patient on the bed.

"No! You musn't!" Nita shouted, running after him. She grabbed his arm so hard that the hypodermic was jarred from his hand and broke on the floor. He turned to face her, quietly, without anger.

"Sam, you mustn't, they were talking about that over at World Health, there were suggestions that they ask for volunteers, but it was decided to wait. It's too dangerous now, there's no need . . ."

"There is a need. Until it is proven that Rand-alpha can't be transmitted from one person to another we can't be sure that there won't be an epidemic. And as long as there is doubt about that I am—both of us—are going to be trapped in this isolation ward. Someone will have to be inoculated with the Rand-alpha virus from the policeman here. Since I have

already been exposed to Rand-alpha by Rand himself, I'm the logical volunteer. Any arguments?"

"I should——"

He smiled. "In this particular case, my dear doctor, it is women and children last."

For a long moment she was silent, then she turned away and opened the autoclave. "I can't argue with you," she said. "Perhaps you are right, I don't know. In any case I can't stop you. But I'm the cytologist here and I'm not going to let any ham-handed intern give himself hepatitis or pyemia or anything like that." She took out a new hypodermic. "I take care of preparing it, right?"

"Right," he said, and turned back to his patient while she prepared the culture. He knew, without reasoning it out, that she would make no attempt to fool him and prepare an injection of sterile water or neutral plasma. This was too important. She might be a woman, very much of a woman and equipped with all the female feelings and emotions—but she was still a physician.

"All ready," she said.

He swabbed his arm himself, and when he saw her hesitate he took the hypodermic needle from her fingers, held it vertical for a moment and squeezed out a few drops, then plunged it matter of factly through his skin.

FIVE

"The Rand-alpha virus didn't propagate in human tissue culture." Nita said, her hands clasped so tightly together that her fingertips were white, "So there is almost no chance that you will catch the disease." She was trying to reassure herself as much as him and he recognized the fact. It had been an abrupt change for her, to move in a single day from the quiet laboratory to his jarring contact with death.

"Little or no chance at all," he said. "Hadn't you better report to McKay what we have done while I take a look at the patient?"

The policeman was still asleep—but was his breathing hoarser? Sam thumbed the *transcript* button on the medical

recorder and it whirled softly as it scanned the minute-to-minute record it had made of the patient's medical history since he had been placed in the bed. There was a clunk and the sheet of graph paper fell into Sam's hand. He followed the recorded curves of the different instruments and they all showed a steady deterioration up until the time of the interferon injection. At this point—almost three hours earlier—the decline levelled off, even improving slightly when the antipyretic brought the fever down. But the remission was over, the fever was rising again, blood pressure decreasing and the stricken man was sliding once more towards the threshold of death. Sam at once prepared another injection of interferon and administered it. It appeared to have no effect.

"Dr. McKay was very angry," Nita said. "Then he said that we must keep accurate account of what happens, he thinks you're an insane fool—I'm quoting—but he thanks you for doing it. Has there . . . been anything?" She turned his wrist so she could look at the dials of the telltale there.

"No, no reaction at all, you can see for yourself. There's no reason that there should be, human tissue culture is sensitive enough. If Rand-alpha were transmittable to human tissue we would know it by now."

Once more a patient of Dr. Bertolli's was dying before his eyes and there was nothing he could do. The interferon had worked at first, delaying the onslaught by a few hours, but it would not work a second time. Higher and higher the fever rose and the antipyretic no longer affected it. The heart-lung machine was attached and then the artificial kidney when renal failure seemed imminent. Sam's only hope was that he could aid the patient's body in its fight against the invading virus, support it with transfusions of whole blood and stave off secondary infections with antibiotics. It was a hopeless cause but he would not admit it. This was a battle he had to win, but he could not. Only when Nita pulled at his arm and he became aware that she was crying did he turn away.

"Sam, he's dead, please, there's nothing more you can do."

The exhaustion hit him then, how long had it been, twelve hours or more? He looked at his watch and noticed the telltale on his arm. It was registering normally, though his pulse was depressed with fatigue. He had forgotten all about it!

If he were going to catch the virulent Rand's disease he would have had it by now, the experiment had paid off, he was safe. It seemed a small victory after the tragedy of the last hours.

"Sit down, please," she said, "and here's some black coffee." He sipped it first, then gulped at it, drinking almost the entire cup at once before he put it down.

"What's been happening?" he asked. "It's after two in the morning."

"We've been released from quarantine, that was Dr. McKay's decision. He said if there were no symptoms by midnight that the quarantine was over . . ." She put her hand on his arm as he started to rise. "Now wait, please, finish the coffee and hear the rest."

He hesitated a moment, then sat down heavily. "It's good coffee and I'll have another cup." He almost smiled. "I'm sorry if I have been acting like an idiot, but this whole dirty business has been so personal, ever since Rand came out of the ship, practically falling into our arms. Here, sit down, and have some coffee yourself."

She poured the coffee and stirred cream and sugar into hers.

"The city is in a very bad way," she said. "I can tell that from the medical reports. The Rand-beta virus is easy to pick up and deadly. The birds die very quickly after being infected, but by the time they do their entire body and all their feathers are coated with the virus. Apparently the virus spreads by simple contact with the skin, all of the people who have caught it have either handled a bird or touched the ground where the bird has been. The virus eventually dies after leaving the host, but they are not sure yet how long it takes."

"How many cases have there been?"

She hesitated a moment before she answered. "Over three thousand the last I heard."

"So fast——! What's being done?"

"So far just stop-gap measures, but there is a meeting going on right now, all the medical authorities, the Mayor, police, everyone, here in Bellevue in auditorium number two. Prof. Chabel of World Health is the chairman and he wants you to come down. I saved that information for last because you looked like you needed the cup of coffee first."

"I did," he said, standing and stretching, more under control. Nita stood too, very close and his hands went out, almost of their own volition, taking her by the shoulders. He started to say something but he was aware only of the warmth of her flesh through the thin cotton smock. Then he was pulling her closer and her lips were on his, firm and alive, her strong arms holding him tightly against her body.

"Well!" he said, more than a little surprised at himself. "I'm really not sure why I did that. I'm sorry . . ."

"Are you?" She was smiling. "Well I'm not. I thought it was very nice. Though I imagine it would feel even better after you have shaven."

When he ran his fingers up his cheeks they rasped like sandpaper. "I hadn't realised it—I must look like a porcupine, I certainly feel like one. Before I go down to that meeting I'll have to get rid of these."

The strip lighting around the mirror in the bathroom threw back dazzling highlights from the glazed tile and polished metal fixtures, and Sam squinted at his features through the glare. The radiating head of the superonic shaver moved smoothly over his skin shattering the brittle whiskers, but was irritatingly audible when he pressed too hard over the bone. The shaver's sound was of course too high pitched to hear directly, but it vibrated his skull and set up overtones that whined in his inner ear like a fleet of tiny insects. His eyes were red rimmed and set in darkened sockets. Aspirin would take care of the headache and 5 grs. of benzedrine would get him through the meeting, but he would have to stop by his room first and get some shoes, the white jacket and pants would be all right but he couldn't very well wear the cotton scuffs.

"Will you let me know what is going to happen?" Nita asked as he was leaving. He nodded as he pushed again, impatiently, on the door switch as it slowly began the opening cycle.

"Yes, I'll phone you as soon as I can," he said distractedly, thinking about the city outside. He would have to be prepared for a number of changes.

When the outer door finally opened after the sterilizing cycle and Sam stepped through the first thing he saw was Killer Dominguez stretched out asleep on a bench outside.

Killer opened one eye suspiciously when the door mechanism hummed, then jumped to his feet.

"Welcome back to civilization, Doc, for awhile there we were afraid they were gonna throw away the key on you, but I got it on the grapevine that you were outta quarantine so I came along as a committee of one to offer congratulations."

"Thanks, Killer. Did the grapevine also tell you that I had to get right down to this meeting?"

"It did. And Charley Stein in the gyn lab said they would probably incinerate all your clothes. Including shoes? I asked, and he said no doubt of it." Killer reached under the bench and dragged out a pair of white, gumsoled shoes. "So I figured at least you oughta have a pair of shoes, so I got these out of your room, and I see I figured right."

"You're a friend in need, Killer," Sam said kicking off the scuffs and zipping up the shoes. "You've been on duty while I've been locked up here—what's it like outside?"

For the first time since Sam had known him Killer's face lost its neutral expression of urban sophistication, falling into lines of fatigue and worry.

"It's rough, Doc—and its gonna get rougher. Everyone's staying in the house with the doors locked but pretty soon they're gonna start getting low on food and figure the best thing to do is to visit the relatives in the country and then the fun'll start. The whole thing's being played down by the papers and tv, but you can read between the lines and I've seen some stuff myself—a riot on the east side but nothing in the papers about it."

"I think we'll have it under control soon," Sam said as they went to the elevator, wishing he could put more sincerity into his words. "Once we've stopped the birds from spreading Rand's disease it will die out."

"There's a lot of birds in the world, Doc." Killer said, chewing idly on a toothpick, his accustomed unshakeable expression back.

The entrance to auditorium number 2, was closed and guarded by an unsmiling policeman who refused Sam admittance and kept his hand on his belt near his gun while he talked. When he had been reassured that Sam did have business here he called on his helmet radio and a few minutes

later Eddie Perkins, one of the resident surgeons, opened the door. Killer vanished and Eddie ushered Sam into the cloakroom.

"I have to brief you first," he said, "before you go in there. It's turning into a real battle."

"Whose side are you on?"

"You might as well ask," Eddie smiled crookedly and took out a pack of cigarettes and when Sam refused lit one himself. "I've been drafted with Dr. McKay's team, he's been officially placed in charge of the medical investigation and treatment for Rand's disease, everyone remembers what he did with Topholm's pachyacria. He throws some weight with the public health people, less with the police and military, and none at all with the vote-hungry politicians. He's trying to convince the governor that he should declare martial law so the UN Army can come in—we'll need them sooner or later, so it's better sooner—and at the same time we should destroy every bird within a hundred mile radius of New York."

"There must be hundreds of state parks and game sanctuaries in that area. I can imagine what the conservationists are going to say!"

"They've already said it—and to the governor, who you'll remember is up for re-election in the fall."

"What can I do about all this?"

"McKay says you can probably swing the vote the right way, he's been stalling until you showed up. You make an entrance and everyone will shut up and listen to what you have to say. You're the hero of the moment, the guy who first saw Rand and who went into quarantine with him, then took a dose of the bugs to prove that Rand-alpha is not communicable between human beings. Once that's shown to be true the panic about catching the disease will die down along with all the talk about evacuating the city, and it will stop the worry about quarantining the cases we have so far. Then once you establish the non-communicability of Rand-alpha you have to say in a loud and clear voice that the only way Rand-beta can be stopped is by killing a few million birds. Do you agree?"

"I—yes, of course I do. It sounds like a horrible idea, but it is the only thing to do when we have no cure for the disease.

Stop it now before it spreads and we'll have it stopped forever."

"That's the old fighting spirit," Perkins said as he started for the door. "Convince the ward heelers of that and we can get on with the job. Give me a two minute start so I can tip off McKay, then bust in. Go right up to the platform, we'll be waiting for you."

They were slow minutes. Sam straightened his white jacket in the cloakroom mirror and tried to brush away some of the wrinkles. His throat was dry, just the way it used to be before a combat drop. Politicians! But they had to be convinced, at once, every minute's delay spread the circle of contamination further. He pushed through the door and went down the aisle of the partially filled hall towards the impressive group of uniforms and business suits seated around the long table on the platform. Heads turned toward him and Dr. McKay broke off his speech and greeted him.

"Now, gentleman, we can at last have a few facts to deal with, incontrovertible facts and evidence on which we can base a logical decision. This is Dr. Bertolli whom I think you all know by name."

A murmur rippled through the hall and Sam tried to ignore the staring eyes as he climbed the four steps to the stage. McKay waved him to his side.

"At the present moment Dr. Bertolli is the world's clinical authority on Rand's disease. He was the one who met Rand when the ship landed and attended his case in quarantine here, as well as the second case, that of police officer Miles. In addition he is the man who conducted the experiments that have just proven that we can only catch Rand's disease from birds, not from one another. Dr. Bertolli will you tell us, what were the nature of these experiments?"

When McKay said this, Sam realized that the man was a shrewd politician as well as a physician. By not revealing the exact nature of the communicability tests he had set the stage for a dramatic revelation by Sam. Sam normally did not have much use for political doctors, but he realized that at this moment he would have to be one himself. His audience had to be convinced. There was an expectant silence as he turned to face them.

"Laboratory tests have revealed that Rand's disease appears

to have two forms, called alpha and beta for identification. Commander Rand died of Rand-alpha but it was impossible for him to infect any creature other than members of the class Aves, birds, since any and all kinds of birds apparently can catch this disease from man. When the birds become infected the disease becomes Rand-beta, a virulent form, that can be passed on to other birds or to human beings. However when man catches it, it appears as Rand-alpha again—this is what officer Miles died of. This disease can not be communicated to others."

"How do you know, doctor?" McKay interrupted.

"Because I injected myself with the live virus taken from Miles."

Sam broke off as a concerted gasp ran through the audience, those at the table nearest him inadvertently leaned away. McKay had a cold smile as he put his hand on Sam's arm.

"There is no need to be alarmed, if Dr. Bertolli were to have contracted the disease he would have the obvious symptoms by now, it has been observed that all of the cases now under treatment developed within one hour of exposure." He dropped his arm and sat back in his chair, looking directly at Sam who now stood alone, facing the silent audience. "Do you have any more suggestions for the treatment of Rand's disease, doctor?"

"None," Sam said, then let the silence stretch. "As of this present moment the disease is incurable. Anyone who contracts it will die. The only way to prevent it will be to wipe out the reservoirs of infection, to kill every bird within ten miles of New York City, or twenty miles or a hundred or a thousand, whatever is needed to make sure that not a single bird escapes. I know this is a shocking idea, but there is no alternative. To put it very simply—it is the birds or us."

There were a number of angry shouts which Dr. McKay ignored, almost turning his back so he would not have to notice the red-faced Governor of New York State who had sprung to his feet.

"We have one person here who is qualified to tell us what must be done. Professor Burger, curator of the Bronx Zoological Garden. Professor Burger . . ."

Burger was a slight man with a pink, bald head covered by a few carefully placed strands of white hair. He spoke

with his face lowered and he was difficult to hear until the hall grew quiet.

"... patterns of flight and normal roosting and homing behaviour of various species. I have worked out the maximum area of possible infection, representing we might say a diseased bird of one of the more free-ranging species being infected and flying until unable to continue then infecting another and so forth. I would therefore say—" he shuffled through the papers before him and a muttering grew in the audience. "I beg your indulgence, gentlemen," he said, raising his head and it could be seen that his eyes were wet and tears marked his cheeks. "I have just come from the zoo where we have killed, poisoned all of our birds, all of them—yes, here are the figures. A radius from Manhattan of one hundred miles in all directions, slightly more on Long Island to take in Montauk Point, should be satisfactory. Though this area may have to be extended depending on later reports."

"That's impossible," someone shouted. "That will be an area of nearly ten thousand square miles, it would take an army!"

"It will need the army," Burger said. "The UN Army must be called on for help. It will need gas, poison bait, shot-guns, explosives . . ."

Slowly, through the following uproar, Prof. Chabel's gavel could be heard, banging for attention. He continued until his voice could be heard.

"This is a problem of World Health, which is why I was selected to chair this meeting. I believe we have heard all that is necessary to make a decision and I call for an immediate vote."

There were more complaints at this which died away even slower. The vote, when it was finally counted, was no landslide, but the effective measures had been passed. The army would move in and the slaughter would begin at dawn.

"I saw on tv where the beach on Coney Island was covered with dead seagulls, washed up during the night, so they closed the whole beach off not that anyone is breaking their neck to go swimming anyway."

Killer talked around his half-chewed toothpick while he drove, tooling the big ambulance down the centre of the deserted crosstown street. All the cars were parked and locked and there were no pedestrians in sight.

"Slow down," Sam said. "Remember we're cruising and not on the way to a ruptured appendix." He was sitting on the right, looking into all the doorways and areaways that they passed. So far he had seen nothing. It was crowded on the front seat with the three of them there. The third man was a UN soldier named Finn, a tall Dane bulking like a pack mule in his full field equipment and forced to lean forward because of the flame thrower in his back.

"There under—under the car," the soldier broke in suddenly, pointing at a delivery truck. "I think I saw something there." They braced themselves as Killer hit the brakes and squealed to a stop.

Sam was first out, shouldering the emergency bag as he went; the contents of this bag was one of the measures that had been outlined at the meeting the previous evening.

Finn had good eyes, the dark shadow huddled against the rear wheel of the truck was a young man who tried to crawl further under when they approached. Sam knelt down and, even in the bad light, he could see the characteristic flushed skin and incipient boils of Rand's disease. He took a pair of elbow-length isolation gloves from the bag and pulled them on.

"Let me help you out from there," he told the sick man, but when he reached under the man scrambled further away, eyes wide with fear. Sam grabbed his leg, warded off one feeble kick, then slowly pulled him out into the street. The man struggled briefly, then the whites of his eyes rolled up as he passed out: this would make handling him a good deal easier.

The gas mask was an ordinary can respirator type from the fire department stocks, and had been modified quickly by

coating the inside with a biocidal cream. When Sam had seated this firmly on the patient's face he took a pressurised container of antiseptic from his bag and soaked the man's clothes and skin, then rolled him onto his side so he could do his back. Only then did he strip off the gloves and begin treatment, sure that any Rand-beta virus on his skin or clothing had been killed. He took off the gas mask and prepared an injection of interferon, still the only treatment that had any affect on the disease. The UN soldier came back and stood frowning down at them and fingering the handpiece of his flame thrower.

"There are no birds near here, none, I searched very carefully. Have you asked him where he could have touched a bird?"

"He's unconscious, I didn't have a chance."

Killer had backed the ambulance up and opened the rear door, then wheeled out the stretcher. He tilted his head to one side and the other, frowning down at the unconscious man's face.

"Don't he look sort of Italian to you, Doc?"

"He could be—but what difference would that make."

"Maybe nothing, but you know there's plenty of pigeon fanciers in this neighbourhood, racers and homing pigeons, and a lot of them are Italian. They keep hutches on the roofs."

They both looked up automatically as he said it, just in time to see a flick of white on the edge of the parapet high above.

"No—not my birds, didn't have anything to do with my birds . . ." the sick man shouted, trying to struggle to his feet.

Sam ripped the end off a riot shot—a disposable, one-shot hypodermic of powerful sedative that was self-powered by a cartridge of compressed gas—and pressed it to the struggling man's arm. It hissed slightly and the patient fell back, unconscious.

"Roll him onto the stretcher and get him into the ambulance. Finn and I will see what's on the roof."

Killer protested. "You could use me there to—"

"I could use you here to watch the patient a lot better. On the job, Killer."

They went as far as as the top floor in the elevator then headed towards the stairs, the soldier first. Doors slammed

shut as they approached and they knew that they were being watched all the way. At the head of the stairs was the roof door, closed and sealed with a large padlock.

"The rights of private property must always be observed," Finn observed gloomily, rattling the lock. "However paragraph fourteen of our emergency commission reads . . ." the rest of his words were drowned out as he raised his steel-shod size fifteen boot and kicked hard against the lock. Screws squealed as they tore from the frame and the door swung open.

Ahead of them stood a large and freshly painted dovecote above which two pigeons were circling. Clearly visible on the floor inside were a dozen more lying on their sides, some feebly beating their wings.

"What is this floor made of?" the soldier asked, stamping his foot on the roof. Sam looked down at it.

"This is a new building so it must be one of the asbestos slurries."

"They are fireproof?" Finn asked, opened a valve on his tank.

"Yes, of course."

"Very good." He raised the flame thrower, waiting for the birds in the air to settle. They were disturbed by the strangers and by the sick birds lying below. The soldier watched steadily, nozzle pointed and his finger on the trigger, until all of the birds were down at the same time. He squeezed the trigger.

A roaring tongue of flame licked over the dovecote changing it from inert wood to a burning framework in an instant. One of the birds was caught in the air, a burning puff of fire that crashed to the roof.

"You're murderers!" the young woman screeched as she came through the door behind them. She tried to clutch the Finn but Sam took her arms and held her immobile until she burst into tears and sagged against him. He let her slide down to the doorstep and touched her wrist lightly with his telltale. No, she didn't have Rand's disease, she was just one of the unfortunate bystanders so far. Perhaps the man in the ambulance was her husband.

There was a bubbling hiss as Finn sprayed the roof and the burning framework with his chemical fire extinguisher. While he kicked the smoking debris aside to make sure the

flames were out he talked into his helmet radio, then rejoined Sam.

"I've reported in and they will send a decontamination team up here. We can go." He was young, Sam realized, and was trying very hard not to look at the girl sobbing on the step.

When they came out of the building Killer had the ambulance waiting in front of the entrance with the car door open and the turbine throbbing.

"They got a riot," he called out, "Up by the Queens Midtown Tunnel entrance, it's outta our district but they need all the help they can get, dispatcher said to get up there."

As usual Killer did his best to make the ponderous ambulance perform like a racing car, thundering it north on Park Avenue, then swinging into 20th Street. They drove with the windows closed, as ordered, and the odour of burnt fuel was strong in the cab. When they passed Gramercy Park a decontamination team in sealed plastic suits was raking up the corpses of dead birds: a shot gun thubbed under the trees and a tumbled ball of black feathers dropped to the ground.

"Poison grain, that's what they been spreading," Killer said, swinging into Third Avenue and standing on the accelerator. "That gets most of them, and what the poison don't get the shotguns do. It's a real mess—hey, look up ahead!"

A jam of unmoving cars filled the street, most of them empty now: two of them had crashed together and burned. A motorcycle policeman waved them over to the kerb and leaned in the rolled down window.

"They got some casualties down on the plaza by the entrance at 36th, you know where it is?" Killer flared his nostrils in silent contempt at this doubting question. "It's quieter now, but keep your eyes open." He pointed to the soldier's flamethrower. "You got a weapon besides that thing?" he asked.

"I am fully armed, officer," Finn swivelled in the seat and his recoilless .50 appeared in his hand.

"Yeah, well don't point it at me, just keep it handy. There's been trouble down here and there could be more.

Take this tank up on the sidewalk, there's room enough to get through."

This was the kind of driving Killer enjoyed. He bumped up the kerb and rolled down the sidewalk towards the plaza. There was the sound of shouting ahead, and racing motors, followed by a tremendous crash of breaking glass. A man ran around the corner towards them, his arms clutching a load of liquor bottles. When he saw the approaching ambulance he ran out in the street to go around it.

"A looter!" Killer said, curling his lip in disgust.

"He's not our responsibility—" Sam said, then broke off as the man came closer. "Wait, stop him!"

Killer did this efficiently by throwing his door open just as the man was trying to pass. There was a thud and the crash of breaking bottles, then the ambulance braked to stop. They were so close to the wall that Sam had to vault the hood, jumping down by the fallen man who was on all fours, shaking his head in a welter of broken glass and spilled whisky. Sam bent to look at his face then stepped back, pulling on isolation gloves.

"Stay in the cab," he shouted, "He has it, an advanced case."

Sam was looking into his bag, taking out a riot shot, and when he glanced up the broken bottle was coming down towards his face and Killer was howling a warning from the cab. It was trained reflex that raised his arm to stop the blow, his forearm striking at the other's wrist. The man was weak—how could he walk at all riddled with the cysts as he must be?—and could only swing again feebly. Sam kept a tight grip on the man's wrist while he slapped him in the back of the neck with a riot shot. The stricken man began to sag at once and Sam had to drag him clear of the broken glass before he could let him fall to the ground. As swiftly as possible he administered the interferon shot and the prescribed antiseptic treatment. Killer had the upper bunk swung down and locked and Finn helped him swing the inert body up into it. When they moved forward again the UN soldier walked in front of the ambulance.

They could not reach 2nd Avenue because the crush of cars had pressed up onto the sidewalk and against the buildings there. Sam unshipped two of the lightweight magnesium

stretchers and the emergency kit and, fully loaded, twisted his way behind the alert soldier towards the plaza by the tunnel entrance.

The riot was over and had left behind a score of wounded and dead. An airborne UN medical team had arrived with the soldiers in a big combat copter, it had landed in the roadway just before the tunnel entrance, and they were already tending the wounded. A blood-soaked policeman lay on the ground next to his patrol car and the drip in his arm led to the plasma bottle hung from the car's rearview mirror. The soldier had moved in quickly and aided the police in rounding up those of the battered rioters who had not escaped. Separated from the jam of the other cars was a still smoking and flame-seared panel truck. A police lieutenant near it saw Sam's white jacket and waved him over.

"Anything to be done with this one, doctor?" He pointed to the man crumpled on the front seat of the truck whose hand, spotted with dried blood, hung out of the window. Sam put down his burdens and pressed the telltale against the projecting wrist. Temperature seventy-eight, no pulse.

"He's dead." Sam put the instrument back into its case. "What happened here."

"Just a crowd at first, we're trying to control all traffic to the Island because most of the cases of plague are still coming from there. Make sure people live there or got business, and stop them from taking any birds out. That's what set it off, there was a lot of horn-blowing and shouting, but nothing else until someone saw the sign PET SHOP on this truck and hauled the doors open. This poor slob had it full of birds from his shop, God knows what he thought he was doing with them. Someone shot him, they set the truck on fire, then they spotted a couple of guys with plague and after that I lost track until the army arrived . . ."

"Doctor—over here!" Finn was waving and Sam saw that he was pointing to two men lying on a cleared patch of ground. They both had Rand's disease. He began the prophylaxis and treatment at once.

Maximum capacity of the ambulance was eight and they had only six cases of Rand's disease, but all of the conscious burn and wound cases refused to travel in the same machine. There was no point in arguing, so they carried in the un-

conscious policeman with the plasma drip and left the last place empty. Killer backed skilfully up the street and, with siren wailing, they rushed back to Bellevue. On the way they received a radioed warning that the emergency wards were full and the operating rooms jammed: they went around to the main entrance where volunteer stretcher bearers from the clerical departments were waiting to carry the patients up to the just-evacuated maternity wards. The hospital was rapidly being filled to capacity.

Sam was refilling his depleted emergency kit in the supply room when Tomo Miletich, another intern, found him.

"Sign here and here," Tomo said, pushing a hospital form over to him. "I'm taking over your meat wagon and you're supposed to call telephone central for a message. Is Killer your driver?"

"Yes, he's at the wheel," Sam scrawled his initials. "But what is it about?"

"No idea, I just follow orders. See you—if I survive Killer's driving." He shouldered the refilled kit and left. Sam looked for a phone.

"Just a moment, Dr. Bertolli," the operator said, and flicked through her message file. "Yes, there is a guest in your room who is waiting for you, and after this will you please see Prof. Chabel, he's with Dr. McKay in 3911."

"Do you know who is waiting in my room?"

"There is no record of that, doctor."

"Yes, well thank you." He hung up and rubbed his jaw, wondering. What was this all about? Who could be important enough to take him away from the emergency work? And how were Chabel and World Health involved? He started to call first, then decided it would be better to go right up. The only stop he made was to wash some of the soot from his hands and face before he pushed upon the unlocked door to his room.

It was an UN army officer, a big man whose back was turned as he stood looking out of the window with his hands clasped behind him in the position of parade rest. His garrison hat was on the table and the peak was rich with gold braid, a field officer. Sam's eyes jumped from the hat to the familiar hand-tooled holster hanging from the officer's belt out of which projected the chrome and teak butt of a recoilless .75.

As the man turned Sam's shoulders squared automatically and he had to resist the desire to throw a salute.

"It's been ten years, hasn't it Sam?" General Burke asked, swinging about and sticking out a large and gnarled brown hand. Sam took it and remembered just in time to clamp down hard with his fingers so that they wouldn't get crushed.

"Yes, sir, at least ten years," Sam answered, he could think of nothing better to say. Burke looked the same, perhaps a few more crowfeet at the corner of those burning, dark eyes, may be a little more thrust to that big jaw. But what was he doing here?

"Listen, Sam, I won't call you doctor if you won't call me sir, or general." He gave a last powerful contraction before he let go of Sam's hand. "My friends call me Cleaver."

"I was there when you got the name," Sam said, and he had to smile as he did. It was during the evacuation operation on Formosa. There had been a night guerrilla raid while all of the officers had been in the mess tent and, for one of rare times in his life, Gen Burke hadn't been armed. But he had grabbed a meat cleaver from the cook and howling like an Indian—thereby giving new strength to the rumour that he was half Apache—had chopped a hole in the side of the tent and fallen on the guerrillas from the rear. It was a night that was hard to forget—especially for Sam, who had been the rawest second lieutenant in the company.

"By Christ, I had forgotten that, you were a crummy shave-tail then, but you learned fast enough," Sam was expecting the slap on the back so he swung with it so that his shoulder blade wasn't fractured.

"Cleaver" Burke had a big mouth, big muscles and at times seemed to be a parody of the perfect Texan. He was also one of the shrewdest field officers in the army and did nothing without a purpose.

"What are you here for, Cleaver? It can't be just to renew an old acquaintance?"

"Right from the shoulder like always, hey Sam? Pour me a drink of something and I'll lay it on the line."

There was an open bottle of Irish whisky in the closet and Sam, remembering Cleaver's tastes, found a water glass and filled it half full. He hesitated until he remembered he would be off duty for awhile, then poured one for himself.

"Here's to the Irish, their bogs and their whisky," Gen. Burke said holding up his glass.

"Uisce beathadh."

Burke drained most of it with a single swallow then frowned at the empty glass before he put it down. "This plague from space is the biggest trouble you or I have seen in our time, Sam, and it's going to get worse before it's better. I need your help."

"There's not much that I can do, Cleaver. I'm out of the army and busy doctoring."

"I know, and I'll let you go back to work as soon as we're finished, but I need some more information. You were there when Rand came out, you talked to him, you watched him write that message. Do you have any idea what he meant by it—or why he sealed the ship after he left?"

"Just what I've put into the reports. I did the post mortem and I've been thinking about it since then. You can't put too much meaning into what he wrote, one way or the other."

"What do you mean——?"

"Without being too clinical, let's say his brain was affected. He was barely conscious, with a high fever and his blood stream loaded with toxins. What he wrote about sickness in the ship might have been a terribly important message, or just the meandering of a damaged mind."

Gen. Burke was pacing the room, his anachronistic spurs clinking with each footstep. He wheeled about and glared at Sam.

"But this is just guesswork, you don't know one way or the other. What about the *Pericles*, when you made the phone calls, didn't you see anything unusual, anyone else, bodies, signs of violence? Anything?"

"Just what I reported, Cleaver. I wouldn't know a real spaceship from a tv stage setting. What I saw looked in order, and there was no one visible in any of the compartments. But this should be easy enough to check, someone could get into the airlock with a camera and dial the numbers as I did and record the whole thing."

"Sounds easy enough when you put it that way. But it's very hard to take pictures through a half-inch of steel."

"What do you mean——?"

"I mean that old maid Chabel at World Health is so afraid

of contamination that he has had a steel plate welded over the lock opening and he won't permit it to be removed to investigate the lock or to take the pictures you just mentioned."

"You can't very well blame him, considering what happened when that airlock was open once before. That and Rand's warning. Until we learn more about Rand's disease the wisest thing to do is to leave the ship alone."

Gen. Burke's hair almost crackled with electricity when he brushed his hand angrily across it. "Maybe. And maybe again there are records in that ship about how they got the disease and who died of it and maybe how to fight it. There has to be something written there, and anything would be a help."

"And there might be even worse infections there, which is why Rand sealed the lock behind him. If there were any records of importance he could have put them in his pockets before he landed, after all he was conscious enough to bring that ship home and set her down in one piece. You can argue this either way, Cleaver, and both answers make as much sense. As a last resort I might agree with you, if everything were going wrong. Open it up, we couldn't be worse off. But we're getting Rand's disease under control. It can only be caught from birds as you know, so we're wiping them out. Once the source of infection is removed we'll be rid of Rand's disease."

"I know all about the damned birds, that's why I'm here. I have my H.Q. in Fort Jay but my division is out with shot-guns and birdlime and butterfly nets, stumbling all over Long Island killing birds. They'll do a good job, I'll see to that, but it's no way to fight a war. We need intelligence and what we need to know is in that ship. I'm asking for your help, Sam. After what you've done people respect what you say. If you said let's take a quick peek into the ship there would be enough pressure on old Chabel so that he would have to relent. What do you say, son?"

Sam stared into his glass, spinning the amber liquid around and around. "I'm sorry, Cleaver. I wish I could help you, but I can't. Not this time. You see I agree with Chabel."

"That the last word, Sam?" Burke stood and put his hat under his arm.

"That's it, Cleaver."

"Well you're wrong, son and being bullheaded, but I can't hold it against a man for sticking to his guns. But you think on it and when you change your mind come right to me." He crushed Sam's hand in his and turned to the door.

"I'll think on it, Cleaver—but until there's some new evidence I'm not going to change my mind."

The door slammed and Sam grinned wryly and wriggled his numbed fingers. Ten years hadn't slowed Cleaver down in the slightest. He finished his drink and pulled a clean suit of hospital whites from the drawer. He had a better idea now why Chabel wanted to see him.

Dr. McKay's secretary had Sam wait before she let him into the office, and when she finally opened the door for him he walked into a silence: McKay sitting behind his wide desk and Prof. Chabel puffing his pipe silently in the corner. Sam knew they had been talking about him, and he would find out why quickly enough.

"You sent for me, Dr. McKay?"

"Yes, Sam, I—and Prof. Chabel—wanted to talk to you. There, pull up a chair and make yourself comfortable." McKay rattled the papers on his desk and looked unhappy. Sam grinned a bit as he sat down in the chair and McKay's darting glance caught it, and he was a good enough diagnostician to read the correct meaning into it.

"All right, Sam, no beating around the bush then. We arranged for that buzzard Burke to see you, we thought it would be better that way, get it out in the open. He wanted you to help him, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did."

There was tension in the room now and, without realizing, Chabel rocked forward in his chair.

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him that I couldn't help him, and I told him why. As the situation stands now I feel that your decision, Prof. Chabel, in sealing up the spaceship was a correct one. I don't see how we could gain anything by opening it up, and we could lose a great deal."

"I'm very pleased to hear that, Dr. Bertolli," Chabel said, leaning back in his chair as he pushed the dottle in his pipe down with his thumb. He tipped in fresh tobacco. "We have

enough trouble battling Rand's disease, but we would be in twice as much difficulty if we had to fight Gen. Burke at the same time. The general is a tenacious man which makes him a wonder in the field of battle, but he also wishes to have a hand in policy making. He is far too wise to act without aid, and so far he represents only a small group of extremists who wish to enter the *Pericles*, and up until now the news agencies have co-operated with us in seeing that they don't get their views into print. However this would all change if they had some popular figure on their side—such as yourself—if that happened we couldn't keep this intramural battle under the table, and I don't feel that at the present time we can enjoy the luxury of a policy debate in public. The situation is too desperate for that."

"Desperate——?" Sam asked, surprised. "I had the feeling that things were getting under control."

"Temporarily, and only here in the city. But we are running into immense difficulties in both controlling the movement of the population and in bird extermination. There is no safe agent that will kill only birds nor one that is one hundred per cent effective. We have had to push our outer circle back already because of breakthroughs of infection. The human element is difficult, we have had armed resistance from poultry farmers when we have attempted to kill off their entire flocks, they find it hard to see a connection between their healthy birds and a human disease eighty miles away. And then we have the factor of human fear. Enough people have seen cases of Rand's disease to know that it is striking all round them, and it appears to be common knowledge now that it is one hundred per cent fatal. People are trying to leave the contaminated zone by stealth, or violence if there is no other way, and we have been forced to retaliate with violence—we have had no choice. This plague *must* be confined physically until we have developed some form of treatment." He looked automatically towards Dr. McKay as he said this, as did Sam.

"Has the research turned up anything?" Sam asked in the embarrassed silence that followed.

McKay shook his head *no* with his hands clasped on the desk before him: because they were trembling, Sam realized suddenly. McKay had a dreadful responsibility.

"We have a number of teams working around the clock, but we have accomplished next to nothing so far. We can describe the development of the disease better now, we know the first symptoms appear within 30 minutes of exposure, and we have developed supportive techniques that affect the advance of the disease, but they only slow it. We have not reversed one case yet. And there are a growing number of cases all the time."

"So you see, we have more than enough problems as things stand. Gen. Burke represents just one more difficulty that we are not equipped to cope with."

"I would like to ask your help in another way, Sam," McKay broke in.

"Anything, of course."

"I could use you on my team. We're trying everything possible to breakthrough on Rand's disease, and we need all the help we can get. You'd be an asset, Sam."

Sam hesitated a moment, trying to frame his words exactly before he spoke. "I don't envy you your job, Dr. McKay, even with the help you have. You must have pathologists, virologists, internists, epidemiologists, cytologists—all the best people in every field working with you. I, well, would be out of place with them. By chance I was there when Rand left the ship and later I was the best guinea pig handy to try the Rand-alpha virus on. But that's all. I'm an intern and I hope to be an experienced surgeon some day—but right now I think I'm most valuable in the back of an ambulance. Thank you for asking me, but I think I would just be a—dead weight with your people."

Chabel puffed on his pipe, saying nothing, and McKay smiled wryly. "Thanks, Sam, for going so easy with an old man. I really would like you on my team, aside from the obvious political fact that I would prefer you there rather than backing Gen. Burke. But I'm not going to force you. God knows there is enough work out there for all of us and more." His intercom hummed and he switched it on. "Yes, of course," he said into it. "Send her in."

They were standing and saying goodbye when Nita Mendel entered with a sheaf of papers. She stopped at the door.

"I can wait if you're busy, Dr. McKay," she said.

"No, that's fine, just leave them here. I want to go over these with Prof. Chabel."

They went out of the office together and Sam said, "Coffee—or better yet, some food, I've missed some meals."

"I bet it won't be as good as the coffee we had in our private suite up there in quarantine."

They both smiled at the memory, nothing more, there was nothing more they could do, here in this place, at this time. Sam recognized the feelings he had—then turned his back on them. The world now was too upside-down to allow him to consider personal desires. They took the elevator to the staff cafeteria.

"It's good soup," Nita said, taking small and precise spoonfuls.

"And cheap too, very important for starving interns. Was there anything new in those reports, Nita, anything not classified that is?"

"No, not classified, but not for the public either. The hospitals report 8,000 cases in Manhattan alone, 25,000 more in the other boroughs and the suburban area. The army has commandeered a lot of hotels for emergency use, there aren't enough medical staff or supplies to care for them all, though volunteers are pouring in."

Sam pushed his half-finished bowl of soup away and stood up.

"I'm going to have to get back on the job—I had no idea it was that bad . . ."

He broke off as he picked his name from the string of half-heard messages from the loudspeaker on the table.

". . . for Dr. Bertolli. Will you please report to Dr. McKay's office. This is urgent. Dr. Bertolli . . ."

He went there as fast as he could without running, and pushed the door open to find both McKay and Chabel staring at a thin strip of paper.

"I think this is something you can do, Sam," McKay said, smiling as he held out the paper. "There's been a report from Orange County, from a GP up there. He's been treating a case of Rand's disease and he says that he has effected a cure."

—to be continued

It was as if they were sitting, talking to themselves, not caring who overheard. It was horrible.

AS OTHERS SEE US

by E. C. Tubb

The sea was dappled with moonlight, the troughs ebony, the crests silver, the surf a frosted shining as it beat against the shore. It was cold, the air holding a crystal clearness, the wind, little more than a breeze, sighing as it swept the sand. The surf made a sucking roar as it retreated on the ebb, little streamers of water shining in the moon, tiny captive pools gleaming alone and, somehow, forlorn.

Left, thought Mark, discarded, separated from the parent mother, divorced from the cradle of life which was the sea. And yet the pools, had they awareness, would have known hope, not fear. They would not really die, these little, forgotten fragments of water. They would dry, their substance evaporated by the sun, rise to form clouds and rain, fall to form rivers and streams to merge finally, again with the sea.

It was a poetic concept and it warmed him as he walked so that he could forget the bite of the wind through his thin clothing, the suck of the sand at his broken shoes. The beach was deserted, the upper reaches changing its configurations beneath the touch of the wind, the lower wet and firm from the wash of the waters. There was only the moon to watch his final journey.

It was a full moon, round, the mottled face brilliant, hypnotic as it hung in the sky. Iris, he thought. Hathor, Selene, the Eternal Goddess, the Universal Mother, the shining purity of the Ideal Woman. It would be good to die beneath her gaze.

The sea was closer now, the roar and suck of the surf louder, the sigh of the wind and the bite of the wind stronger to ear and skin. And it was beautiful, the sea, all dark and silver, all movement and restless energy and yet, despite that, offering such peace. It would be good to walk into the water,

to feel it around his ankles, his thighs, his chest, his throat, to feel it rise above his mouth and over his head. To walk until he could walk no further and then to fall, to lie, to become one again with the beginning.

He should have had an audience but there was no one to watch, to admire, to sense the dignity of the moment. Nothing but the sea, the sand, the watching moon, the sighing wind, the little pools of silver left by his broken shoes and the thing which waited, exhumed by the tide, to catch his foot.

Sprawled on the wet sand he looked at it, not conscious of the sullen roar of the surf, the cheated sigh of the wind. The sea-gods would have no sacrifice tonight; the set purpose which had brought him to the beach had shattered like crystal beneath the impact of the fall.

It hadn't hurt him, that fall, drunks and babies are not so easily hurt and he had his share of both; more than his share of fool. Only a fool would have chosen such a romantically impractical way to die. A wiser man would have known better, that this imagery of walking beneath the waves against the suck and surge of the tide, the pull of hidden currents, the natural buoyance of the body, the uneven footing below, was impossible. But a wiser man would never have sat on the wet sand, eyes wide in the moonlight, entranced by the thing which had tripped him.

Mark was not wise, not as the world counts wisdom, but he could recognise the obvious. The universe existed for the single purpose of placing this thing at this spot so that, at this time, he had stumbled over it and so had halted his journey towards the sea. It was a terrifying concept and he cringed in the moonlight, conscious of the immutable workings of destiny. Then, as the universe continued to exist, he began to shake with silent laughter.

Weakness caused that laughter, the weakness of malnutrition, of desperation, of the appalling need to, again, make a decision. There were tears beneath the laughter, hysteria behind the amusement. Fate, it seemed, was determined to hold him within the prison of existence.

And yet, nothing had really changed. The sea waited as it would always wait, the wind sighed as it had always sighed, the moon shone down just as coldly remote as before. He could rise and continue his journey and no one or nothing

would stop him. But his determination had been broken, he couldn't keep at it, he could never keep at anything for long.

His silent laughter died and he began to gouge at the sand around the thing which had tripped him. He didn't want it but the work closed his mind to the sea, the wind, the watching moon. Closed it also to the city, the human jungle, the penalties of failure. While he dug he need think of nothing but digging so he gouged and worked until the thing came free of its grave of sand. Then he sat in the moonlight turning it over and over in his hands.

It was circular, thin, wide, the whole so crusted with marine growths as to be unrecognisable. It could be anything or nothing at all. A scrap of metal from some ship or shore junk-yard, tossed into the sea to be washed to the place where he had found it. He should have thrown it away.

Home is where you hang your hat; Mark had no hat, no home. He had a top-floor room in a decayed apartment house each room of which held its quota of human misery. The floors sagged, fly-blown, naked bulbs threw a dim light over the stairs, damp patches on the walls added their musty scent to the odours of stale cooking on each floor. His own room was something out of Dickens.

There was an army cot with army blankets and a scrap of carpet which was so worn and old and dirty that a sack would have been an improvement. There were bare, gaping boards, a splintered wardrobe, a couple of grocery crates hung with a curtain which held cooking utensils for the solitary, coin-operated gas-ring. A tin box with rusted shelves was intended to hold the food he did not have. A cold water faucet hung on a leprous pipe over a cracked and stained washbowl. The single, shadeless bulb threw light as cold as icicles.

He shut the door, softly, not so much out of consideration for others as because he was behind with the rent and wanted no arguments with the landlady. He sat on the bed and set the thing he had found beside him. He shivered, the air was damp and cold, his clothing wet. He was tired but his mind was too confused for sleep. He drew a blanket over his shoulders and looked at what he had found.

Rubbish, he thought, and yet it had come from the sea

and so was touched with the magic of the waves. The growths covering it were damp, green and brown, shells of tiny bivalves interlaced with strands of seaweed, the whole rough and ugly to the touch. Scrap, of course, what else could it be and yet, for him, it had a special significance. Fate had directed his foot to the place where it lay and, in a sense, it had saved his life. It could turn out to be a lucky-piece, a mascot, something to bring good fortune and, God knew, he needed good fortune.

Hunched on the bed beneath the thin, soiled blanket he began to clean the thing he had found.

It was hard. The marine growths were like concrete, his nails broke against their adamantine shells. More than once he almost gave up but to do that would have thrown him back on the necessity of thought and he did not want to think. Even so he finally lost his temper at the stubbornness of the growths and, in a fit of petulant rage, flung the thing from him. It struck against the edge of the washbowl with a sharp, cracking sound and, for a moment, he feared that he had smashed the bowl itself. He hadn't, he had only cracked the crust of growths. From then on the rest was easy.

It was easy because the growths hadn't actually wedded themselves to the metal beneath. There was a thin space, no thicker than a sheet of paper between the crust and the metal as if the first, original growths had died, their shells merely providing a support for the later accumulations. If Mark had known more about the sea he might have wondered at that accumulation. He would have recognised the things forming it, known of their rate of growth, felt a touch of awe, perhaps, at the antiquity of what lay within. But he knew nothing of such things. He beat and pried at the coating until it flaked away from what it had covered and then sat, looking at it, feeling a little lost.

He didn't know what it was.

It was a hoop, thin, an inch wide, the outer surface engraved with irregular lines and lumpy with oddly shaped protuberances. The band was divided, the metal springy so that it could be opened and snapped around a narrow waist or a large head or, he thought oddly, a thick neck. It wasn't steel, even he knew that anything made of iron would have rusted,

nor was it of brass or bronze. An alloy, obviously, but that was a facile answer. It told him nothing.

And yet the thing had a purpose, it had been made, it was no natural object. A part of something modern, perhaps, that would account for the alloy even though it did not account for the shape and design. Materials now were functional, they did not carry ornamentation for the sake of it. Victorian then? That would explain the ornamentation but would it explain the alloy?

Mark shook his head, feeling the bafflement of the unknown. The band could be anything, scrap, a discarded fragment of metal from some ship as he had first thought. Or it could be a piece of Neptune's jewellery, the waist-band of a dolphin, the girdle of a mermaid, the collar of a guardian shark. The fantasies came easily; too much of his life had been spent in fantasy.

He yawned, the tiredness of his body had dulled his mind, and the riddle of what he had found was not to be solved so easily. Tomorrow would do for that. The alloy could be rare, the thing of some value, he would find out tomorrow. Tomorrow.

He yawned again and reached for the light switch. His hand struck against the band and he hesitated. The metal looked like gold, perhaps it was gold if gold could be made springy, or perhaps it was just plated with the precious metal. It would be wise to protect what he had found.

He slipped it beneath his pillow, tested it, grimaced as it dug into his cheek. Under the thin mattress was no better and the room was devoid of other hiding places. For a moment he was at a loss, not knowing what to do, then the shape of the band provided the answer. He snapped it around his thin waist, under his shirt, next to his skin. It was tight but not too uncomfortable and his fatigue had grown so that he didn't care. He didn't even mind the coldness of the metal against his flesh. He was too tired to do anything but sleep.

In the morning he learned the purpose of what he had found.

He woke, his stomach aching with hunger, the constriction around his waist unnoticed in the general misery. He lay shivering beneath the blankets, eyes closed, wishing that he

were young again with people to care for him and the worries of existence safely relegated to someone else. The voice was very plain.

"Ten dollars," it said. "Even if I got a job this morning it would have to last a week, and I'm not going to get a job this morning never mind what the papers say about the work situation, and even if I did what about the medicine the doctor told me to get?"

Someone talking in the passage outside, he thought, and waited for the inevitable answer. None came. Whoever it was soliloquised. Whoever it was? He frowned, the voice had been very plain but utterly devoid of any clue as to the sex of the speaker. That was odd, very odd, he could still hear it, as plain as if the speaker were in his room, and surely he should be able to tell whether or not it belonged to a man or a woman?

And then he was in no doubt. He sat upright, cheeks flaming, the forgotten prudishness of his early life outraged at what he heard. It was a woman, it had to be, but what woman would so blatantly advertise her serious consideration of joining the oldest profession?

He rose, opened the door and caught a glimpse of a stooped, female figure walking towards the head of the stairs. Mrs. Cardew, fifty if she was a day, a thin unattractive mouse of a woman who, he vaguely thought, earned a living scrubbing stairs. A woman no man would even smile at let alone offer money to and she—? The concept was ludicrous!

As ludicrous as old Mr. Hamand, dying of cancer yet worried about his old age. As stupid as the man on the second floor who nursed a private hope that, one day, he would hit it lucky on the numbers and win a fortune. As ridiculous as the drunk who dreamed, vocally, about the woman he was going to meet and the life he would live when he found her. Dreams, all dreams, all mixed up with nagging little worries, personal problems and a continuous stream of self-communion, and, with it all, a disjointed succession of jumbled words, incompleting sentences and vocal images.

They had, Mark thought, all gone insane. How else to account for the sharpness of their voices, the naked intimacy of what they spoke? He walked slowly down the stairs,

hearing each voice die a little as he moved from it, a new voice gain in stridency as he approached another door. It was as if they were sitting, talking to themselves, not caring what they said or who overheard. As if they didn't know that they could be overheard and so did not care. Like a woman who will undress with abandon, not knowing that she is observed.

At the foot of the stairs he paused, listening to the landlady, the voice must have belonged to her, hearing her talking about the outstanding rent, the worry of the upkeep of the building, the general overtone of misery and hopelessness, the surcease which was to be found in a bottle and the vicious little streak of sadism which made life tolerable.

Smells drifted from her room, warm, cooking smells, and his stomach ached with hunger. He put his hand to his waist and felt the thin, hard metal of the thing he had found gripping him, digging into his flesh. He lifted his shirt and pulled it free, the metal twanging slightly as he released it. And, with the soft twang, the voices faded to a tenuous, undecipherable murmur. He rested the thing on the floor as he tucked back his shirt and the murmur died to silence. He picked it up again and the murmur returned. Excitement exploded within him.

It is a dangerous feeling, the knowledge that you own the world. Stronger than alcohol, stronger than drugs, more impelling than money, the awareness of supreme power is something to be respected. Mark had it, and, having it, felt like a God.

Telepathy, of course, it had to be that. The ability to read minds, to listen to the most secret of thoughts, to eavesdrop on the secluded, private world contained within a human skull. To know, without doubt, without any possibility of misunderstanding, without any fear of lies, exactly what anyone was thinking and to know it even as it was thought. More. To know the hidden greeds, ambitions, desires, fears of any other human being and knowing them, to play on them, to forestall doubts and misgivings, to say just the right thing at the right time and so to own, utterly.

Power! Absolute power! And it was all his, thanks to what he had found.

He looked at it, sitting on a bench near the museum, feeling the smooth slickness of the metal within his hands, running his fingers over the odd configurations on the outer surface of the band. It was old, he knew that now, but how old he couldn't guess. The pictures in the museums had helped a little, the legends more. Old mythology was full of stories about various 'gifts' from the Gods. The collar Menat, gift from the goddess Hathor to Setil, way back in old Egyptian times, a gift which was supposed to give the 'fluid of life' whatever that meant. And there were other myths, so many other legends, surely there had to be a grain of common truth beneath the fanciful interpretations of millenia?

How old was the earth? thought Mark. How many civilisations had grown and flowered and finally died to live only in mythology? How many times had this planet being visited? How many forgotten things were to be found deep in the soil, lost in the sea?

Fantasy came easily to him, always it had been easier for him to weave his own world of make-believe than to accept harsh reality. It was not hard for him to imagine a history for the thing in his hand. A race, human perhaps, who had invented devices similar to modern radio. A communication artifact, something to break down language barriers, perhaps, an instrument which could be easily worn and which would give the wearer so much power. Once, perhaps, they had been as common as wrist watches, ball-point pens, electric flashlights, transistor radios, a part of everyday wear. And, if so, how probable it was that they could have been lost or stolen, mislaid or discarded so that, eons later, one would be washed ashore by the sea.

The day was cold but Mark didn't feel the chill, so warmed was he by his own thoughts of the life to come. The possibilities were endless but all led down the same road. In this civilisation he would be supreme.

Something jabbed into his side. He looked up at the glowering face of a cop. The billy swung towards him again.

"Move!"

"But—"

"I said move!"

Mark obeyed. Inwardly he fumed but he could afford to wait. The cop probably thought him a bum, a homeless

drifter, a scrap of the human debris contaminating the city. Well, let him think that, let him have his moment. Mark's time would come and, when it did, then that cop would sing a different tune. At the moment he had more important things to worry about, the most immediate being the necessity for food.

He donned the belt, he thought of it as that, behind a bush, tucking down his shirt, conscious of the cold air against his body. Voices droned all about him, a continuous susurrations of sound like the muted drone of heavy traffic on a main highway. He made no effort to single them out, telepathy, he had discovered, was little different to ordinary speech. The only real difference was that the speaker didn't know he was being overheard, that he was betraying himself with every thought, that he was as naked and as helpless as a new-born babe.

Confidently Mark set out to conquer the world.

The beach was as he remembered it, the water dappled with moonlight, the wind a sighing breath against his bare skin, the foaming surf a glistening mass of sparkling silver. Even the ribbons of water were the same, the tiny pools, the separated and doomed fragments of the parent body, lost and helpless to do anything but await rebirth.

He strode towards them, the soft sand of the upper beach dragging at his shoes, filtering past the uppers and through the cracks so that his feet moved in a gritty surround. He ignored the discomfort of his feet, the cold wind, the loneliness of the beach. These things were physical, to be endured because they could be altered, but the thing which had driven him to the beach was not physical and could not be endured.

He paused at the edge of the tide-flattened sand and looked at the thing in his hand. It shone ebon in the moonlight, a flat band of frozen water, a snare and a delusion, a thing to be hated and feared. It seemed incredible, now, that he could ever have valued it so much.

It was even more incredible that, with it, he had thought to conquer the world.

It was ironical and he should have laughed but amusement was the last emotion he could feel. Disgust, yes, contempt, hatred, loathing, an overwhelming repugnance, these he had

felt in varying degrees all through the day. There had been other emotions, words he could not bear to remember, analogies which, even now, filled him with a terrible sickness. The day had ended and he had despised himself.

It was obvious, of course, a matter of simple logic had he only stopped to think about it. The belt had given him the power to read minds but that was all. It had opened a window, cracked a door, given him the ability to listen to secret thoughts. It was an instrument with which he became a superb eavesdropper. He should have known that those who eavesdrop seldom hear good of themselves.

No one ever really knows how they appear to others. Between them and the universe lies a barrier of politeness, pity, discretion, tact and a mutual protection. Even when they look in a mirror they are protected by a veil of illusion, and the odd 'candid snapshot' which touches on the truth is quickly discounted, forgotten, pushed to one side and explained away. But naked, uncensored thoughts know nothing of illusion.

Mark wasn't old, not that old, and it wasn't his fault that his face was not quite as other men's or his body as straight as it could have been. He had never, until now, thought of himself as a thing of horror, of disgust, a twisted, filthy parody of a man. But, if he was to believe what he had heard, he was all that and more. And he had to believe, he had no choice.

And so the beach, the sea, the final decision.

And, this time, there would be nothing to stop him.

—E. C. TUBBS

A frightening little sidelight on a nastily probable future.

A QUESTION OF CULTURE

by Richard A. Gordon

The local scandal station was on full blast on the tri-d, and Mr. Shepherd's two sons were watching it enthusiastically, although it was a programme of which neither their parents nor the Aesthetics Council would have approved. There were moves afoot to ban such stations as enemies to true culture, and it seemed likely that legislation would pass through the Council in the near future, and the irreverencies would disappear from the screen forever.

"D'ya hear the latest 'bout ol' Pete Tchaikovsky?" the announcer was yelling, "an' the 'Pathétique'. Queer's lament!" The announcer went off into paroxysms of laughter and the two children followed suit, filling the small apartment with a high-pitched cacophony which, thought Shepherd, in a sudden fury, was even more discordant than all the twelve-note stuff they were continually having shoved down their throat.

Suddenly the annoying announcer and the official letter he had just received combined to make him lose his temper. He stood up from the pneumo-chair and yelled into the ears of his children:

"Shut up that bloody row! And get out of here! It's time you were both in bed anyway. You'd think you owned the place, the noise you make. Like a pack of bloody monkeys!" Leaning forward, he flung a stern arm at the door. "Now get to bed *now*! And don't let me hear another bloody *squeak* out of the pair of you . . ."

They stared at him, innocent all of a sudden, dismayed and young. He almost relented of his fury, but he knew that if he did they would grab their opportunity and stay up for

the next hour or more. He motioned violently towards the door once again, said angrily, "out!"

Tears brimming in ten-year-old eyes, amazed that their normally meek father should turn into such a monster, they silently got up and left the room, eyeing their mother accusingly for refusing to come to their help. The door slammed.

Shepherd turned off the tri-d, sighed heavily, and faced his wife. She sat in the other comfortable chair, small, rather dowdy after fifteen years of humdrum marriage, and silent. He shrugged as if apologising for his actions and sat down to the letter once again.

He was trembling slightly, partially as a result of his sudden fury, and partially because of what the letter contained. His wife got up and put an arm round his shoulder, comforting.

"Thanks, Edith," he sighed. "I suppose the whole thing's my own fault. I should have remembered it's been over a year since my last pilgrimage to the Gallery. I suppose sub-consciously or something I just didn't want to remember about it. Now they've caught up with me."

His wife said matter-of-factly.

"Well, you'll have to go now, won't you." She shrugged too. "Or end up in one of the Culture Realignment Centres for Aesthetic therapy. And what'd happen to us then? No one to look after us . . ."

He waved a distraught arm, cutting her off. It was sufficiently disturbing to think about having to make the annual state-prescribed pilgrimage to the National Gallery without the attendant complications of what might happen if he did not do as requested in the official letter. So there was no use going into hysterics about it. He'd probably be up half the night, using up most of their electricity quota, learning up all the necessary facts from 'Kulture', a magazine to which he subscribed more because it would be suspiciously non conformist to fail to do so, rather than from any other reason. But for once it would come in useful, because his kulture knowledge was suspiciously poor for a male of his age-group. Why, he wasn't even sure if he could name the eight B's straight off. There was Beethoven, and Brahms, and Bach, and Berg, and . . . Britten, of course, and . . . who the hell were the other three?

He stood up and faced his wife with a decisive air.

"You go to bed, my dear. I may be up for quite a while. Have to learn up all the back numbers of 'Kulture'. It'll take me quite a long time, I should think."

It did, too . . .

The next morning, fortified by a strong cup of coffee, he set off on his pilgrimage, heart beating heavily. Edith wasn't coming with him; as a housewife, she was exempted. Before he left the tiny apartment, he made quite sure he was carrying his test-card, which was filled in for the past fifteen years, since the establishment of the Aesthetics Council as a global power. The first years marked down on the small plastic slip were eminently satisfactory: they showed that his knowledge and appreciation of cultural subjects had been much above the average. But since then his yearly tests had showed a marked decline; the last being only some two per cent above the pass level, and being circled in red-ink, with an accusing arrow traced out towards the previous high level, thirty per cent more than the pass mark. Why, last year, he had actually failed on literature—he had been entirely unable to identify Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, and had only been saved from declassification to a lower standard of living by a last-minute identification of a Modigliani nude.

This year, his hopes of a pass were at rock-bottom. For a start he had made the grave error of leaving his pilgrimage until so late that the Council had been obliged to call him up for it, thus no doubt marking him out as a backslider who would do well to be carefully watched and questioned more than was normal. Also, of course, there would not be so many people in the Gallery at this time of the year—most would have already passed through the tests—and soon it would be closed down for the annual overhaul before a fresh series began.

The Shepherds' apartment was in the northern suburbs of London, in an area generally known to its inhabitants as Brum, although the derivation was entirely obscure. Consequentially, Shepherd was far enough from the National Gallery to warrant a coptor flight. He flagged down a coptor cab near his apartment and sat down after he had given his destination. He began to go over the points he had studied

the previous night, but after several minutes he gave it up as a bad job. Instead he wondered wildly how he had come to be in this state of affairs. When the Aesthetics Council had first come into power in the early nineties, he had really enjoyed his Culture, he had welcomed the pedestal on which it was set. But with the passing of years, it had gradually palled on him. Perhaps it was something to do with the manner in which it was forced down his throat, the manner in which Culture had become the racial god; something to be worshipped rather than enjoyed. Anyway, it had palled on him, and gradually his subconscious feelings of rebellion had caused his assiduous knowledge and learning of all things cultural to ebb away into the recesses of his mind. Thus his yearly performance had gradually become poorer and poorer. He had even begun to question the motives of the Aesthetics Council. At times, and this notion horrified him, it seemed almost as though their power was dictatorial and oppressive rather than beneficial. Nominally, they were meant as no more than a body bent on the dissemination of cultural activity into a philistine world. Somewhere along the line they had gained political control . . .

The coptor cab landed him as requested in the middle of Britten Square, next to the tapering needle of Kandinsky column. As he stepped from the cab, his ears were suddenly attacked by a savage blast of music which ripped and tore its way into the very depths of his being. He recognised it immediately, which was a relief. It was the *Mars* movement from the *Planets* suite by Holst, something he had heard many hundreds of times before. Standing irresolute at the base of the towering stone pillar topped by the father of the Abstractionists, he remembered the days when another figure had bestrode the same pillar, the days when the square had been named after a famous naval engagement of the early Napoleonic wars, the name of which temporarily escaped him. But those days were long in the past, before the advent of the Aesthetics Council.

He glanced automatically at his watch, and began to move across the marble square towards the Gallert on the northern side. As he did, the strident tones of *Mars* suddenly ended amidst thumping of kettledrums, and a fresh piece of music

began to blast from the hidden loudspeakers. Shepherd stopped dead. A cold sweat broke out over him, as he realised he couldn't remember the name of this one, although Bach knew he'd heard it enough times. It sounded vaguely like something by Schoenberg or another of the early twentieth-century composers. If he was asked what it was and guessed wrong . . . He started walking, expecting the gentle tap on the shoulder of a cult-man at any moment.

When it came, he was still surprised and shocked, although he had been dreading it. The sudden tap made his heart jolt, and he started. When he had turned and his worst suspicions were confirmed, he groaned inwardly, while forcing his facial muscles into what was intended to be a smile.

"The Muses attend you," he said ritually, shakily.

The heavy-jowled man in the olive uniform smiled serenely, said nothing, and retained his grip on the little man. He felt in his left jacket pocket and brought out a stylus and a sheet of mimeographed paper, creased and torn.

"Just want to ask you a few questions," he said, still smiling.

Above and around them the cacophonous music roared, deafening. Shepherd hated the atonality, the discordancies, the jangling brass, and he couldn't see how anyone in his right mind could possibly like it, let alone *worship* it. But he could never show that. He was in enough trouble anyway.

The cult-man glanced at the sheet of paper, and said automatically, "Just a routine check to see how you know your stuff."

He waved an unconcerned arm at the swirling music all around them. "Who wrote it, when, and what's it called?" he demanded in one breath.

Shepherd suddenly had an inspiration, perhaps brought about through desperation. "Er—er—Alban Berg. Violin Concerto . . . about—about seventy years ago," he muttered, searching desperately for the date lodged somewhere in his recalcitrant memory. He found it. "1935!" He stated triumphantly.

The cult-man appeared to be satisfied with the answer, but he wasn't finished. "Who founded the Bauhaus?" he demanded abruptly. Shepherd sighed with relief. That was one he knew. He'd been watching a tri-d programme on the subject only a night or two before. "Gropius," he answered

confidently. "A German architect just after the first world war." The cult-man ticked in a column on the paper, satisfied.

"Just a check," he stated. "We're carrying out a survey on culture assimilation." He stepped away into the crowds.

Shepherd, thankfully making his temporary escape towards the threatening front of the Gallery, didn't doubt this. But he knew quite well what would have happened to him had he failed to answer correctly, with his record. His name and social security number would have been taken, and a few days later he would be called up to one of the Culture Realignment Centres about which people knew so little and feared so much. At that, he might still end up in one if he didn't watch his step.

The interior of the National Gallery hadn't changed much, but the atmosphere had. The restful peace and beauty which had characterised it had been replaced by a nervous fear. Those wandering around the salons staring at the paintings were not so much concerned with them as with the impassive cult-men which were present everywhere. At any moment they could be descended upon by one of these guardians of culture and aesthetics, to be cross-examined as if for their life—which, in a way, they were. For were their answers not satisfactory or accurate they could find themselves in a number of very sticky positions indeed, which only began at declassification.

Once your names and social security numbers had been taken and checked at the ornate Gothic portico, it was safest to head direct for that part of the gallery which housed the period of art about which you knew most. In that case, you usually managed to be questioned on that particular period, and you at least had a sporting chance of avoiding having weak points shown up under the relentless questioning.

Shepherd headed straight for the large section dealing with Renaissance art, since he considered that he knew considerably more about Titian and his compatriots than he did about all the current painters about whom everyone raved these days. His children contemptuously called him a square as they reeled off their knowledge about Dali and Miro and Chagall and dozens of others about whom he knew desperately little, and perhaps he was. He'd always liked a painting

to look like something he could recognise in the physical world, not a frightening mire of Freudian abstraction and association which all the twentieth century masters seemed to inhabit.

With thumping heart, he stopped in front of a painting with which he was more than familiar—a repro hung on their living-room wall. Behind him, he sensed movement. Then came that dreaded tap on the shoulder.

"Mr. Henry Shepherd, I presume?" said the polite voice, in parody of an earlier, greater figure. "You checked in five minutes ago? You've got to the Renaissance remarkably quickly. Aren't you at all interested in Byzantium, or anything like that?"

Shepherd, mouth dry and in a cold sweat, stuttered an answer, cursing his lack of adequate forethought. Of course they'd keep a check on him—he was a potential failure. He realised, too late, that the old adage about giving a criminal enough rope to hang himself had never been more true. That was the danger about the tests—they were so informal and unpredictable that you could be trapped in any one of a hundred ways.

Staring at the thin ferret-face of the cult-man waiting for his answer, he stuttered out a hastily-contrived answer that sounded ridiculous even to him. "I'm considerably fond of this painting," gesturing at the scene on the wall, "and I felt I had to come and see it first."

The small cult-man inclined his head cynically. "So all the other masterpieces in the Gallery are of no account compared with this Titian?" he enquired, scepticism in his voice.

Shepherd floundered ever deeper.

"It's just that—just that I particularly wanted to see this one first. It's been a long time . . ."

Aghast, he realised his mistake, and the cult-man fastened onto it. "A long time? But what was to stop you attending earlier? No one was preventing you from coming to see it?" He shrugged sceptically. "Come. You must allow me to conduct you over other sections of the Gallery. I assure you, they are equally fascinating." He regarded the Titian on the wall assiduously. "There is no need to question you about this particular scene, I see." He chuckled dryly. "Bacchus

can go on chasing Ariadne for a while yet. We can always come back."

He grabbed Shepherd's skinny wrist and led him, palsied, towards sections of the Gallery about which he had only dreamed in nightmares.

They stopped suddenly. The cult-man gestured towards a cracked old painting of—presumably—Christ, on the walls. "Now that's a fascinating one," stated the cult-man lightly. "You wouldn't happen to know who painted it, would you?" His tone seemed unmistakably to imply that he didn't think he would know.

With a certain rebellious satisfaction apparent in his voice, Shepherd answered him without any pause. "Bosch." The cult-man shrugged his thin shoulders, and they moved on to other parts.

But it was when they came to newer sections that he began to get into difficulties. The questions were rather deeper, rather more probing. He managed to identify a Renoir, not that that was very difficult, but he got both the title and the date wrong. For this fault he received a searching stare from the cult-man. Then he got an entirely unexpected question.

"Purcell didn't write the *Trumpet Voluntary*. Who did?"

"Clarke," he answered automatically. Well, that was easy enough.

But that wasn't all. The real grilling began.

"Who wrote the *Morte d'Arthur*? When?"

"Malory . . .er—1470!" This answer got a slight smile from the cult-man, who distinctly marked a cross on a slip of paper he held in his hand. Shepherd paled.

"Who wrote *Comus*?"

"Milton."

"What is chiaroscuro?"

"Er—light and shade." In a slightly enquiring tone.

"This quotation—'damn with faint praise'—from what?"

"Pope?—'Essay on Man'? . . ." Again the damning little cross. He wasn't doing nearly well enough. He knew that one well enough, but in his panic it had slipped his mind. Biting his lip nervously, he awaited the next question.

And so it continued—for longer than any interrogation he had ever before experienced. And far more difficult. Palestrina, Haydn, Mussorgsky, Berlin, Lerner, and God only knew how

many else. And at the end he knew he hadn't done nearly well enough for any sort of a pass. He was sweating freely.

"One more question," announced the little cult-man in the smug tone which Shepherd now hated so much. "Tell me, please, the real name of the man who wrote under the name of 'Mark Twain'?" He waited, like a bird, expectantly.

Shepherd racked his demoralised brain desperately, but it refused to give up the information. It was the sort of ridiculously easy thing he'd always known, but now it seemed as though his mentality was in revolt against the enforced dissemination of culture. Mute, unable to trust himself to speak, he shrugged his shoulders.

The cult-man affected surprised dismay.

"Really, Mr. Shepherd," he said in an artificially hurt tone, "you mean to tell me that you haven't heard of Mark Twain's real name—Clemens, Samuel Langhorne, to be exact? Tut-tut. That isn't very good, is it?" Fascinated, as though by a snake about to strike, he watched as the cult-man drew a straight and heavy black line through the slip of paper upon which he had been marking the progress of the test. He licked his lips as he did so, and carefully drew another line at right angles, intersecting in the exact centre of the square of paper. It seemed almost as though it was something he enjoyed doing.

"No," he murmured, repeating himself. "That really isn't very good at all. In fact, not nearly good enough. You require some help from us, Mr. Shepherd, so that you can learn to appreciate the culture with which we have been endowed with properly."

Shepherd seemed to drop into a suddenly bottomless pit that opened before him, and he leaned against the ornately tapestried wall to support his weak limbs. As though this gave him some support, he started forward hotly, with nothing to lose.

"What do *you* know about the arts anyway?" he shouted furiously. "Just knowing the facts and figures about it all doesn't mean you can appreciate art like the composers and writers and artists meant it to be appreciated! You're just like a snake, and so are all of your bloody Aesthetics Council—pretending to love culture and aesthetics and ramming them down our throats until we get sick and tired of the whole

idiotic set-up! You can't make people like art and culture by shoving it at them, but you can alienate them and spoil whatever enjoyment they ever got out of it. Not that you give a damn about that anyway. It's just a good excuse to rule over everybody, whatever the original intentions of your hellish organisation was." He sneered. "You arty pseuds are just the same as the rest of us, only a hell of a lot more hypocritical. You pretend that you care for the human race and want to save it from all its troubles and sins and worries by teaching it culture and appreciation of art and abstract philosophies and aesthetics and a whole lot of crap like that! You're just out for what you can get, that's all, though everything looks very nice and proper on the surface, Beethoven and da Vinci and Shakespeare and all your other idols. Well, you've done something I'd never have thought possible, prostituted genius, made it dirty and unclean and despicable. *And* you've been doing it for the last fifty years, with all those mammoth prices for scraps of canvas which could only be valued in terms of what they meant to the human dream, the human spirit. Oh no. All you little bastards could see was money and power, buy enough Van Goghs, you're nicely set up for life. Doesn't matter what the artist might have been trying to say or do, only money matters. Let's have bigger and bigger prices for smaller and smaller masterpieces; first a million, then five, then ten, then a hundred million, then political power. And you still have the hypocrisy to pretend that you're interested in art for art's sake! Some of you, perhaps, some of you *were* prepared to pay money so that they could have a dream, a vision, call it what you will, for their own galleries, to show people in their own countries. But there were always precious few of them. **All** the rest of you were worried about was how much was this worth, and what could we get out of it? And as for you, you little . . ."

He was still raving when they took him away to the nearest Cultural Realignment Centre. Not much of a crowd had gathered, because such scenes were becoming more and more common, especially near the end of the season, because more people were delaying their pilgrimage in the name of Culture and Aesthetics every year.

The cult-man sighed, and went to the entrance portico to

await the arrival of his next candidate. He was used to these damning and impassioned little speeches by now, but they still occasionally hurt him, for Bach only knew, what he was doing was only for their own good.

But when they came out of the Cultural Realignment Centre, they'd be on the right tracks again. And much, much, happier. They wouldn't ever again have to worry about moral problems, or any other problems, for that matter.

They'd just be able to appreciate culture as it was meant to be appreciated.

And they'd be happier not thinking about it. Much happier.

He sighed again. But there were so many of them these days! And after all the Council had done for the world. People had never, ever, been so cultured as they were in this brave new world!

—RICHARD A. GORDON

EDITORIAL—continued from page 3

BOOKS RECEIVED

Edward P. Bradbury. *The Blades of Mars: The Warriors of Mars: Barbarians of Mars*. All published by Compact Books at 3/6 each.

If you liked the old Martian series of Edgar Rice Burroughs (and which of us didn't?) and if you like a style reminiscent of Michael Moorcock in his Elric period, then you will probably like these very much indeed. If Mr. Bradbury can keep up the supply—and he certainly seems to be a copious worker—then he is likely to build up quite a following for these easily digestible, fast-moving tales. Not my cup of tea but none the worse for that.

Michael Moorcock. *The Fireclown*. Compact Books 3/6.

This has only just arrived so I haven't read it all yet, but so far it's reading pretty well. Good solid ingredients—the twenty-first century, city levels, space-pilots, mobs—and moves along at a cracking pace. Conflict between emotive cult and stilted, artificial civilisation. Heading for a big bang—or a surprise ending. Not really Moorcock at his best but even at his worst he would outrank much of the field.

—K.B.

Jeremy Bentham, born in Red Lion Street, Houndsditch, in 1748, propounded the maxim that the essence of good government was a concern for the greatest good of the greatest number. It seems a reasonable precept, but . . .

DEMOCRATIC AUTOCRACY

by Ernest Hill

The old man in the transparent lustrivex cylinder gibbered and clawed, blue-veined fingers with long ridged white nails spread, slipping over the convex surface, writhing like a bunch of eels. He mouthed—words no doubt, soundless, for the capsule was not wired for sound. A trickle of saliva oozed from the two concave corners of his sunken lips, sagging, flaccid, lacking the rigidity of teeth behind, drooping, a tired parchment over toothless gums. Folds of skin, slower in atrophy than the flesh withered beneath it, hung from his emaciated neck like a turkey's wattles. Sweat glimmered in greasy droplets in the crevices, seeping from over-large pores and his straggling moustache was moist with a slimy mixture of mucus and tears.

The old man was an unsavoury sight, weeping and pawing, gibbering and salivating, his knees bent and shaking in a paroxysm of terror and the warding off of an ultimate degradation in his approaching incontinence. An unsavoury old man and foolish too. There was no cause for fear. No grounds at all for apprehension. The whole operation was instantaneous and therefore painless. Instantaneous pain was pain only, the philosophers had decided, if its intensity at the instant of application was infinite. And what was infinite pain? The disintegration of the body? The vaporisation of the very centres that gave rise to pain?—Absurd. Terror gibbered from the expectation of pain, the anticipation of agony and had therefore its origins in cowardice, congenital and foolish

fearfulness and was thus unworthy of civilised condolence and the pandering sentiment of the uninitiated.

All old men must die and how better than in the instantaneous eradication of the capsule? Quick, clean, hygienic. Death without the anticipatory indolence, fear and discomfort of dying. Switched out of existence. Being and ceasing to be.

Child Manaton nodded. Thoughtfully, clinically, he raised a benedictory finger. So must God the Father have called forth Adam from Adamah the earth, the dust and clay, the tilth feeding the roots of Adam and his children to the end of days. The white-coated Eradicator pressed the green button labelled "Eradicate" and the old man, suddenly rigid in his dance of death evaporated in a spasmodic onrush of neutron bombardment and the cylinder emptied itself with a flush of compressed air, puffing a fragment of green smoke into the external ventilators. The old man, born of clay and animated by the genes of Adam had escaped the ultimate return to earth and rose to God the Father airy as the breath of life itself.

Child Manaton smiled, satisfied, exultant. There had been no pain. The eradication had been patently humane, efficient and hygienic. Child Manaton was a humane, efficient and hygienic person. Child Manaton was Minister of Health. The most ruthlessly efficient Minister of Health in a government, long regarded as the most ruthlessly efficient and enduring of any that either Circassian or Caucasian, Oriental or Negroid had evolved in twenty centuries of political advancement. And now, as a direct result of Child Manaton's humanity, efficiency and application to the ideals and practices of Neo-Benthamite political theory, the government, for the first time in a thousand years was challenged, both by the electorate and by certain of its own less well-informed erstwhile protagonists.

In ten years of office, Child Manaton had swept away the last remaining vestiges of archaic sentimentality still lingering dormant, cluttering the political ideation of many of his subordinates, both in government and in public service. A sentimentality inhibiting the evolution of a rational, efficient, happy and healthy society, flowering like a well-tended

garden, weeds and the withered plucked out, consigned to the bonfire, smoke without ashes, incinerated, eradicated.

And now opposition. Clamorous, incoherent, but co-ordinated opposition. Opposition itself was common enough. The great Debating Chamber on the Thames, the Mother of Democratic Autocracy, was a hive of opposing views, the mouthpiece of that vague, amorphous mass, referred to generally as "the people". A public safety valve, an illusion of common participation in the autocratic, esoteric science of government. And rightly so. This was Democratic Autocracy, the pride and strength of the Circassians, the western answer to the harsh realities of eastern and Negroid oligarchs. But now opposition had congealed, crystallised into a demand for votes, an alternative autocracy to the Democratic Autocrats, an insistence on his, Child Manaton's, removal and a return to the inefficient, ludicrous prolongation of hospitalisation, mental homes and the preservation of life for its own sake to the ultimate debasement of senility and the slow withering-away of natural expiration.

Useless to explain to those whose rational conception was still clouded by an atavistic sentimentality, that true government concerned itself with the greatest good for the greatest number. Ave Bentham and happiness the criterion of all good. Happiness of the living. The dead negated. That a society composed of healthy individuals between infancy and middle age, was happier, more prosperous, more industrious, more ideologically and intellectually malleable than one wasting its resources on the support of its infirm and ageing non-productive members. Sentiment knew no reason, rooted in the past, the religions, the ethical codes of an earlier, lackadaisical age, before the harsh realities of the need to increase production, export or die, industry geared to the consumer, standard of living in ratio to efficiency and similar overstatements of the obvious, had changed the tenets of the creeds, returned them in fact to earlier conceptions on the purpose and attributes of government.

"Eradicate the Eradicators!" was the slogan, coupled with "Child Manaton to the Cylinder!" Death—always death to someone. Curious that the popular demand for an end to eradication should take the form of further, but obliquely directed, use of the eradicating capsule. It had ever been so

in the history of political theory. The attainment of peace through war on the warlike, prosperity through the overthrow of the prosperous, a beneficent society founded on the villainous eradication of the villains. It was not progress the public wanted but reversal. The slave in the palace and the lord on the treadmill. The autocrat in the Cylinder and the old man at Chequers. No—not the old man—themselves. No one cared for the old man or any old men. They were all free to support and maintain their old men, old women, their sick and inform if they wished. But no one wished. They unloaded their redundant relatives on the state and then complained when the state disposed of them humanely and efficiently in the Cylinders.

"It is humane!" he said.

The Eradicator nodded, somewhat impatiently. There were a hundred others in the marshalling halls awaiting their turn and it was hardly the function of an Eradicator to speculate on humanity with a full day's work to occupy his mind and tire his manipulatory finger.

"There's a crowd at the gates," he said, "shouting slogans and throwing mud-pics."

"We will show the film on every screen. They must be made to understand. It is instantaneous and humane."

"It's Sophie Mistle," the Eradicator explained.

"Sophie Mistle?" Suddenly he remembered Sophie. The Prima Ballerina. The darling of the 4030's. Something had happened and she was consigned to eradication. The foolish girl, like all theatricals, had saved no money and somehow had failed to form any lasting liaison with anyone capable of or willing to offer her protection. She was thirty anyway, and old for her trade. What exactly had happened otherwise?

"She broke a leg," the Eradicator explained.

A thirty-year-old ballerina with a broken leg and a crowd demanding her survival. Why? For no other and no better reason than that they remembered her. Was this adequate reason to demand her survival on state funds contributed by the very taxes the clamorers also protested were exorbitant? Government to survive must be strong. It is for the autocrat to decide the means of happiness for the greatest number. The greatest number is an amorphous entity and incapable of deciding for itself. Autocracy, even Democratic

Autocracy rules first by cajolery, conditioning, coercion and finally by the edict of the autocrat.

"Eradicate Sophie," he said, "and film the eradication."

Sophie, in white tights and a flowered, smock-like garment stood, small, fragile, frail and alone in the Cylinder. The cameras whirled and Sophie, used to cameras, dropped a trembling, ungainly half-curtsey on a stiff leg. Her eyes were on Child Manaton, misty with tears, but her head with the fair curly hair was erect and her narrow, angular chin uptilted on the long, slender neck. He noticed the positive demarcation of her clavicles, a rigid outline of bone rather than a merging of neck into the roundness of shoulder. As he met her eyes, he could hardly suppress an atavistic sense of guilt, welling from somewhere below the linen of his fiftieth-century rationality. What was Sophie to him? A not very intelligent dancer, rather ridiculous in the white tights showing the shortening and malformation of her fractured left leg, hastily set by some half-qualified practitioner with time on his hands to dabble with treatment for the non-producers. As he considered her, the initiative passed from him. His index finger, about to gesture the signal for her eradication remained rigid and pistol-like at his hip. Sophie began to dance. Stiffly, troubled with the pain and inflexibility of her leg and the inadequate space inside the Cylinder, he nevertheless recognised from the sinuous gyrations of her arms, a movement from the "Dying Swan".

"Stop the cameras!" he ordered. This was the very thing best calculated to inspire the self-same sentiment it was designed to counteract. He felt, Philistine in the arts that he was, a certain emotional response to this, the most sentimental of all dances. And the wretched girl's chin, resting along the slender flapping white arms was turned towards him and her eyes were the eyes of a dying swan. Ridiculous. The eyes of a dying swan were beady and bird-like. Probably. He had never seen a swan die and had no wish to do so. They were the eyes of a stupid, pathetic failure of a dancer. A failure no less because it had been the accident of a leg rather than a debasement of spirit that had been the cause. A dancer danced with her legs and with one sound leg only she was no longer an artist but a non-productive drone and fit only for the Cylinder. He looked at the Eradicator, swaying

to a music mentally invoked by the sequence of movement, the pathetic flapping of the arms, hopping and pirouetting on the points of one foot, the other trailing behind like a broken wing. Perhaps the Eradicator was a patron of the ballet between his working hours of eradication. One never quite knew with people.

The mental music died away in diminuendo to a sighing cadence. Sophie reached the end of her act, the right leg bent at the knee, the malformed leg trailing behind her, her head and arms looped downward in the elliptical final flutter of ornithic expiration. Testily, Child Manaton snapped his fingers and Sophie, with a final twitch of long, sensitive hands, drooping like the feathers of a wing, vanished in a puff of green smoke swiftly expelled through the ventilators.

"They can go home now," Child Manaton ordered. "They have made their protest."

There would be other dancers and if it were necessary that the ballet should survive, it would do so equally well without Sophie Mistle or any other single individual dancer careless enough to break a leg.

Child Manaton left the Eradicator to his evening's work and entered the elevator. On a jet of compressed air, he was rocketed to the garage on the roof of the building, the West London Disposal Centre. His chauffeur brought the two-seater executive jet from the hangar and Child Manaton climbed aboard.

"Whitehall," he ordered, "the pad." Below, the crowd at the gate was dispersing, urged on by a riot squad with gas jet cylinders and remote-controlled flagellators. The strength of government, he reflected, depended primarily on the efficiency of its police and armed forces. It was not, however, under the present Democratic Authoritarian system, quite immune from ideas. Even ideas that were retrogressive were still as potentially dangerous as those more progressively dynamic. Every means of communication must be mobilised to inform and counteract this misinterpretation of the purpose and expediency of selective eradication. Conditioning through the manipulation of mass media was, in the long run, more efficacious than nerve gas and flagellation.

The jet slipped into the aperture of the wall-hangar outside his pad on the 21st floor of the government accommodation

block overlooking the sprawling area of concrete and lustrivex offices known euphemistically as "St. James's Park". Lilith was there to greet him. Beautiful, sinuous, shapely Lilith, dressed from shoulder to toe in semi-transparent, skin-tight black lumitex silk. The static electricity rustled and sparkled as he ran a hand around her waist and over the divided convex of her buttocks. She wriggled, cat-like against him and her breasts, held in shapely freedom by the supporting elasticity of the material, were soft and pliant against his cheek.

Revealing, enhancing, self-supporting, temperature-controlling, as this, the fashionable garment preferred by the more domesticated mistresses certainly was, it invoked more than any other the desire for its removal. To see the true colour of the flesh it covered, less alluring than its own, to feel the texture of the breasts, less shapely without its support and less silvery silken to the touch.

"Undress!" he whispered.

She removed the snap-cap from a flask of Juvenade, sniffed the rich fragrant aroma and poured a little into two glasses. A slight haze rose from the volatile spirit, rich with the admixture of herbs, alcohol and flavour enhancers.

"Life!" she said.

"Life!" he answered.

She lit a marijuana cheroot and moved to the window, looking out on the concrete wilderness and the streams of personal jets, buses, taxis, threading the sky lanes in the mass exodus of the evening rush hour. He was uncertain of her mood, Lilith, the beautiful feline, the inward-focused intellectual, the thinker, the artist, the accomplished, provocative, skilled and tantalising bed-mate with the fingers of sophisticated genius and cajolery.

"I want you," he said.

She continued to stare out into the now gathering dusk, the blue smoke from her cheroot curling around her straight hair, hanging smooth-combed and shoulder-length, jet black, heavy against the sheen of the lumitex. The long straight line of her spine showed in outline and shadow where the filmy substance clung, duodermis to the moulded contour of scapulae, vertebrae and buttock. She turned slowly and faced him.

"I am no further use to you," she said. "I am disposable."

"My dear child," he laughed. "You are always . . ." He stopped, held by her eyes, deep brown, expressionless and yet with an adamant inflexion of finality, of doom, in their unwavering, unblinking calm.

"I am genito-revulsive," she said.

"You can't be!"

"There was an accident at the centre a few weeks ago when I went for my yearly sterility dose. I was exposed to a radiation leak along with a dozen others. They have all developed frigido-revulsive symptoms. The consorts of several have already tired of them and some four or five have been handed over for eradication."

"But you . . .?"

"You revolt me sexually."

He sat slowly in the reclining chair, rocking himself rhythmically as the enormity of the situation overwhelmed him. There were other women available. In fact, what woman was not available to a man in his position? Women as clever, as beautiful, as accomplished as Lilith; in all respects Lilith's equal and yet they would not be Lilith herself. Stupidly, like a peasant of the people, like an uninitiated irrational, he wanted Lilith; but Lilith as she had been, desiring and desirable. The impossible. The joys of the past returned. Frigido-revulsive. It was common enough. Accidents happened regularly with the sterilisator.

"There must be a cure," he said.

"No one has concerned themselves with cures," she reminded him. "Eradication was simpler, more efficient. More humane. What use is a mistress obsessed with the revulsion of her own frigidity?"

Lilith in a Cylinder. A green button pressed, green smoke and the memory of a thousand days and nights, caressing fingers and the expiation of harsh application to reality in the soft surrender to lips of loveliness, all expelled through the ventilators in a puff of gases to the anonymity of the cosmos?

"Perhaps if I whipped you . . ." But her eyes were cold now, contemptuous. He had no wish to whip her, only a strong sub-rational urge to protect and comfort her. An odd symptom of sympathy, even empathy, an emotion near

to love. Love created by sensuality, mutuality in embrace, things desired, attained and shared, but now separate from its origins. Love, sympathy and empathy. Non-physical emotions identified on the palimpsest of recorded coition memories, yearning in escalation to the orgasm of decisive action:

"Get me Bronstein!" he shouted into the videophone.

The withdrawn, remote expression of skin taut on high cheek bones softened into half animation as she smiled.

"You care?" she asked.

"I care."

"But what can Bronstein do? The old wizard has spent ten years and a fortune in research into the common cold. The indomitable coryza. All he has achieved is itemisation of the mechanics of a sneeze."

"And why the common cold?" he asked. "Because it was the one remaining unconquerable disease, a time-wasting factor in the otherwise perfect medication of the production lines. Damn the production lines! Bronstein can devote his monumental genius to the antidote for genito-revulsion."

"Perhaps," she said, "It would be better if I avoided eradication by becoming a producer."

"You know that's impossible. You have no union ticket for production. You are a mistress and what future have you with frigido-revulsive characteristics, with me, or with any other?"

"I thought perhaps a word from you . . ."

"The Minister of Labour would never agree. A mistress is a mistress, a secretary a secretary, a producer a producer. One exception and the whole equilibrium of union and management crumbles."

"Mistress or eradication?"

"Or Bronstein."

Bronstein's great head with the white flowing hair, broad furrowed forehead and bulbous nose appeared on the screen.

"Why, Minister?" he said.

"I want a cure for genito-revulsion!"

A dozen crows' feet spread from the crinkling eyes as Bronstein smiled.

"Keep them away from the sterilisator and inject them with Unfecund. That's the only sure remedy."

"I demand a cure."

"My function is supposed to be producer welfare. What is non-productive about frigidity? They should all sleep better and work harder in consequence."

"This is not a matter of production this is—well—humanity."

"I thought eradication was humane?"

"It is!"

"I see."

Bronstein's eyes travelled from the face on his screen to the figure in black silhouette against the window. An outline only, duplicating the Minister in curvilinear shadow.

"I see," he said again.

"Can it be done?" Child Manaton asked, the peremptory directive yielding to pathetic supplication.

"I am against eradication," Bronstein said, "And for extension of the medical services to provide assistance also to the non-producers. I will bargain with you. Cure for the silhouette behind you against cure for all things possible."

"It will take time and political manoeuvre."

"My cure—if possible at all—will also take time."

"It is agreed."

"Your word in the name of Bentham?"

"My word in the name of Bentham."

"I feel less frigid already," she said as the video screen faded from opalescent silver to inanimate grey. "The seat of love, the glands and lymph have dried, the anticipation of your touch revolts me and yet somewhere there is a love for you I never felt before, detached from the dead glands, detached I think, from any living part of me."

Outside, bells in the church museums were tolling, fireworks rocketed skywards and mixed with the crackle of squibs, the crack of gunfire and the muffled thudding of gas bombs detonating. Police and military aircraft streaked down the sky lane designated for sentimental reasons, "Downing Street". There were fire-craft propelled on the jets of their inert gas hose nozzles and ambulances, their scoops already lowered, indicating by their presence that whatever the cause of the commotion, producer casualties were involved.

Child Manaton frowned thoughtfully and, raising a quizzical eyebrow at Lilith, he dialled "?".

"Sophie Mistle—Revolution" the computer responded, short of further confirmable facts to compute.

"You should not have eradicated Sophie," Lilith told him, tired and yawning. "It was unnecessary and foolish."

"You know about Sophie?"

"Everyone knows. It was on every screen. She began to dance and then—poof!"

"It wasn't like that," he said. "It wasn't just poof! It was humane and proper."

"They say you disintegrated her clothes first without scorching a hair. They say you gloated at her in that glass thing, cold and naked, before you evaporated her limb by limb."

"Lilith!—You don't believe them?"

"They say you began with the feet and hands and rubbed her away slowly until only the pubis was left."

"You know that is not true!"

"What is truth?" she asked. He felt vaguely that someone had asked the same question once before, had not known perhaps that the essence of truth was always debatable.

"Truth is what happened," he said, "And that did not happen."

"Truth is what the majority believe it to be. Truth is the consensus of belief of the greatest number."

"That is not real truth. That is political and philosophical truth. Real truth is what happened."

"No one knows what happened. You switched off the cameras. Without the cameras it is your one man truth against the greatest number truth. You have tortured and degraded and evaporated Sophie Mistle."

"You say this?" he asked.

"I say nothing. It is not important what I say. Importance lies with the greatest number. That is the basis of organised society. That is Bentham."

A red light glowed by the window and the gas level indicator buzzed its warning. The lustrivex pane slipped automatically down its groove, sealing itself hermetically against the polluted atmosphere outside. The internal atmosphere generator whirled, keeping the air pure inside the pad.

"It is a sizeable revolution," he murmured. "If they have released enough nerve gas to rise to this level."

Lilith pressed the button on the news emitter panel. The cameras were already scanning the streets and air lanes leading to the Debating Chamber. The nerve gases had taken effect and the vast crowds, now robbed of their courage, motivation and purpose were streaming in the general direction of the termini, air-bus, pedolator and underground, shepherded and coerced by the flagellators, reorientation supplied by the hovering loud-hailers: "It is all over. You have made your protest. Go home!"

"At least they've cleared the centre," he said. "I wonder how spontaneous this was?" As if in answer to his question, the ministerial inter-comm panel buzzed and glowed and the prime autocrat's personal equivocator appeared on the screen.

"You are required at once in cabinet!"

"For what purpose?"

"I think," the equivocator equivocated, "It is of no great consequence."

"The revolution—has it any high-level co-ordinated backing?"

"It has and it hasn't," the equivocator smiled before switching himself to the next ministerial screen. Child Manaton turned to Lilith.

"I must go, of course. If the P.A. is calling a meeting at this early stage, there is no doubt the rising is serious. Go to my doctor. Tell him your symptoms. He may think of something."

"What can he think?"

"I don't know. We produce so many drugs these days, I don't know the half of them but their characteristics are all fed into the diagnosticators. He may try psycho-narcosis. Tell him to think of something or I'll have him eradicated. In the end, of course, Bronstein will find a cure."

"There is a great rising in the Midlands," the voice of the news emitter interposed. "Many of the participants have appeared with gas masks and anti-flagellation devices including shields. The leader of the movement has now been ascertained by a process of elimination in the computers. It is Professor Bronstein."

"You've played into his hands," she said. "You have deviated from Benthamite principles and directed his

research toward a cure for me rather than producer welfare and the greatest good for the greatest number."

"The greatest number need me," he said, "and I need you. Narrow principles are always capable of extension."

"If you are the arbiter of their extending," she considered, "Yes. Although this conception seems more in the nature of a contraction."

Lilith hated the marshalling chambers to the state doctors' consulting rooms. Even although, as the mistress of a minister, she was entitled to the yellow panel and preference, there were always many other preferred patients waiting and the medical boredom deterrent was guaranteed to deter all but the really sick or the boredom impervious from attending. Standing at the sliding doors and mentally estimating the numbers of patients, rigidly inanimate, in long rows facing each other on hard chairs down the white-tiled corridor stretching away in elongated 'V' perspective, she was grateful indeed for her status and the yellow panel. She pressed the preferred patient registration button and the automatic patient enumerator announced her number—21. Not too bad. Probably every preferred patient capable of any degree of optical assimilation was watching the progress of the revolution on the home news emitter screens. An ordinary patient arrived and with dejected resignation pressed the registration button on the green panel. "204" the voice enumerated.

Lilith sat on a yellow chair facing a bearded scholiast with the mauve and heliotrope tie of an Emeritus professor of Extra Sensory Perception. She juggled quickly with her thought trains, unwilling to betray the nature of her illness to a stranger with some accomplishment in the telepathic arts.

"You have Blandford's disease of the spleen," the Emeritus professor grunted after studying her with deepseated hypnotic eyes of televisual penetration. Lilith nodded. She had concentrated her awareness on the general area of the aorta and the spleen was admittedly not very far away.

"You are quite right," she said.

"Never wrong," he grunted. "Trained many diagnosticians in my time. No fiddling with instruments, analysing samples. Penetration. Intuitive extra-sensory sub-liminal awareness."

"You have a remarkable talent," Lilith smiled abstractly with the mistress accomplishment of appreciative receptivity. The professor's eyes lost some of their hypnotic fixation and the lines of his concentration relaxed about the muscles of his jaw. He nodded thoughtfully.

"You are in service?"

"I am."

"With whom?"

"The Minister of Health—but of course you had already divined that."

"I had indeed," he agreed. "The Minister of Health? Yes. Yes. Not much chance for me, I suppose? You are quite satisfied in your present position?"

"I am afraid I am."

"Well, if you should ever decide on a change—my card. I have one mistress of course, but she is lacking somewhat in real subject appreciation. Not quite in your class. But I suppose ministers would naturally have the best means of selection. The image of the scientist, cold, impassionate, aloof is always a disadvantageous fiction where mistresses are concerned."

"You ass," Lilith thought, "You've never really progressed beyond Tarot cards. You haven't even the slightest gift. A good mistress is more skilled in E.S.P. than any member of your faculty." She inclined her head:

"You are very considerate," she said. "I will keep your card for future reference."

"We must tick off our symptoms," he reminded her. "We haven't long to wait."

They took the green cards with the card puncher from the racks behind the yellow chairs. Lilith read:

"To enable the diagnostician correctly to ascertain your ailment, it is important to punch the cards neatly and exactly in the squares against your symptoms." She ran her eye down the alphabetical list.

A. Adam's Apple—see goitre.

Allergies.

Adenoids—see catarrh.

B. Bilious attacks.

Bronchial congestions.

C. Catarrhal infections—see adenoids.

Cold feet.

Corns.

There was no reference to frigido revulsion characteristics under the F's which listed only:

Fainting.

Frostbite.

Flatulence.

Flat feet.

Fingers. (a) cut. (b) bruised. (c) amputated.

"You haven't indicated your symptoms," the Emeritus professor told her curiously, applying the punch with dexterous precision to his own card under the heading:

"Urethra—Coxon's disease of."

"They are rather intimate," Lilith murmured. "Would you mind if . . .?" The professor removed his glasses and gallantly averted his eyes. Lilith returned the punch, attached by a chain to the chair, to its hook on the card rack.

"Thank you," she said.

The doctor was young, tired, bored, testy and white-coated. He snapped his fingers for her symptom card.

"There were no symptoms I could punch," Lilith told him. His listless, misty eyes avoided her, looking, as he spoke, at some point over her left shoulder.

"No symptoms on the card—no illness. All known symptoms are listed."

"I am genito-revulsive."

He yawned.

"Modern stuff? Seen it in the cartoons? Women's strip cartoon weeklies have been full of this sort of thing. The sterilizator? It does happen, I believe. What do you expect me to do—cure it? You give me your punch card. I put the punch card into the diagnosticant and the diagnosticant prescribes a cure, neatly outlined with the proper treatment on a prescription card which you then take to the automatic drug dispenser. That is medicine. Far better without the human element. No doctor can remain *au courant* with all the new drugs the research establishments feed into the machines. If a visible ailment needs inspection, we put the member under the fluoroscope. If internal under the through-

ray treatment analyser. What can I do without a punch card or a diseased or mutilated member?"

"You cannot help me?"

"You appear from your mode of dress and from the development of your—shall we say—feminine characteristics, doubtless through the aid of hormones internally and externally applied, to be a mistress. My function is to medicate for the producers and thus ensure our country's survival in the battle for markets. What exactly do you produce and whose mistress are you, since I note you hold the card of a preferred patient?"

"I am in service with the Minister of Health."

In his consternation the diagnostician for a half-moment of inadvertency almost allowed himself to meet her eyes. He jumped to his feet and extended a moist, limp, fragile hand that twitched nervously under the alternating tension and relaxation of awe and obsequiousness.

"My dear young lady! Allow me to examine you. Please, at once—the couch!"

"Shall I undress?" Lilith asked.

He turned a mild, damp pink and his ears quivered with the contraction of the facial nerves. It was never, with the through-ray and the fluoroscope, necessary for a patient, male or female, to strip. Nudity in the female conjured thoughts of cadavers in the dissecting room, cold and messy and less informative and well constructed than the plastic teaching models.

"It will not be necessary. Your—er—clinging garment shows the contours of your body exactly and is less embarrassing to the touch to—well—to both of us. Please lie on the couch."

He laid a nervous, unsure and trembling hand on the general area of femoral symmetry. Lilith reacted sharply, her muscles tensing and her breath indrawn spasmodically over dry lips evincing all the symptoms of fear and revulsion reminiscent of a pubescent virgin rejecting the first unwanted kiss. The diagnostician sighed with relief at the simplicity of his task.

"You are genito-revulsive," he said.

"Yes."

"There is no treatment."

"No."

"Remember to give my best respects to the Minister. My name is Warrant—Dr. Warrant."

"I will remember that."

"You must learn to live with it. Relax. Try a sport. Shoot something. Hunt something. Something small that cannot escape you or your hounds. We have been so long at peace. It is relaxing to hunt and kill. Try something harmless with a baying pack in pursuit. An otter perhaps. Yes, hunt an otter. You will find it most relaxing. We are breeding many otters for the packs to hunt. Or badgers. Have you seen a badger cornered and dug from its hole and torn to pieces by the hounds? You should certainly find it stimulating. There is much to be said for the simple country sports."

"I think," said Lilith, "that when we handed over all public welfare to the state, we handed over the public conscience too. We pay in taxes for the operation of our conscience but a conscience is an individual, personal thing. Can it exist in any corporate sense? A state is a dead thing, Dr. Warrant."

"We begin to live from the moment of our conception and to die from the moment of our birth."

"True."

"My respects to the Minister."

"Life! Dr. Warrant."

"Life, young lady!"

Child Manaton entered the rectangular concrete and lustrivex cabinet offices, the hub and pivot of Democratic Autocracy, high above the Debating Chamber on the Thames. The sliding door slipped silently into place behind him. On the far wall the great clock ticked. Big Harold. The state chronometer. It was the rhythmic ticking that first drew Child Manaton's attention to the unusual silence in the chamber. The Ministers, ranged on chromium-plated chairs with high foot rests to right and left of the Prime Autocrat, were sitting with arms folded, faces, wooden and impassive, turned towards him, cigars and cheroots poised between their fingers, the curling of the blue smoke the only movement visible. Child Manaton stopped in the centre aisle facing the P-A., uneasy, perplexed, premonitory.

"Life!" he said.

The P.A. set a cigar between the stained yellow shutters of his teeth. He puffed thoughtfully.

"Death!" he said at last. The Ministers inclined their heads. Somewhere a news camera whirred. Child Manaton walked slowly to the wide window looking out across the Thames. Hovercraft, poised in their individual auras of spray, silver from the lights on the bridges, were playing their hoses on crowds of demonstrators, sightseers or revolutionaries.

"It all started with Simon de Montfort," he said.

"It began a good deal earlier," the P.A. corrected him. "The Middle East was never so happy and peaceful as in the days of benevolent autocracy under the invincibility of the Pharaohs. Simon de Montfort was a purely incidental phenomenon. With Bentham—he bowed to the effigy above the sliding doors—it was otherwise. The greatest good for the greatest number. It is impossible to envisage a government founded on a better precept. No indication of course of how numerous the numbers should be, birthrate controlled and linked and variable to industrial output, balance of the sexes controlled, everyone happy and the greatest happiness, the greatest good. The unhappy eliminated. The only workable governmental precept. Applicable just as much to a benevolent autocracy as to the more loose forms of so-called democracy. We are the arbiters of the good that the greatest numbers shall receive. You are one person. The inference, I think, is obvious?"

"Eradication?" Child Manaton asked.

"Naturally. The film of your eradication will bring the revolution to a close, eliminate the unhappiness of its suppression and thus contribute materially to the happiness of the majority."

"The system of eradication I have evolved with the general agreement of all Ministers. Will that continue as an article of government?"

The P.A. gestured to the ministerial Public Image Projector. "Cameras off!" he said. "The remainder of the proceedings will be held in camera."

"Naturally the system of eradication will continue," he addressed himself to Child Manaton. "It is the most efficient and conducive to the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The people will be satisfied with your eradication

which will, in itself, imply continuity of principle and *status quo*. No one really wanted the end of eradication. They were concerned merely with the registration of a protest as a conscience anodyne."

"And Bronstein?"

"We shall eradicate Bronstein at a favourable opportunity."

"It seems a poor reward for my long and faithful service to Democratic Autocracy."

The P.A. reached for his top hat as a signal that the meeting was at an end. He placed it on his head at a jaunty angle and took up his silver-topped cane.

"Come, come!" he said. "The individual cannot ask for rewards. Reward has no place in universal law. The saint dies as surely as the sinner and a virtuous life carries no guarantee that the virtuous will win lotteries or survive the bite of a coincidental adder. The individual in the complex of majority rule has no importance whatever and naturally we shall take steps to villify your memory. If you have shown merit, history will doubtless record it." He gestured with his cane to the ministerial ushers. "Take him to the disposal centre," he directed. "Gentlemen, the meeting is closed."

"Lilith!" Child Manaton whispered as they pinioned his arms. The world, never very important, had already ceased to be, but Lilith was somehow still there, permeating the vacuum.

Lilith was waiting in the marshalling hall at the West London Disposal Centre. There had been no one to stop her. Egress was impossible but no one had thought to raise barriers against admittance. She took his hand and her dark brown eyes were soft, upturned behind the curtain of her falling hair.

"I will come with you," she said, "Into the chamber." Child Manaton looked at the Eradicator, the impersonal disposer of all things from Ministers to ballerinas and old men in their dotage. "It is the same to me," the Eradicator shrugged. "Law demands I register that the eradication is completed. I have no instructions with regard to surplus disposal."

"It will look better on the film," the Public Image Projector considered. "'Minister evaporated with mistress' has

a certain news-worthiness. Sex interest. All the world loves a lover."

"You are sure, Lilith?" he asked. The unreality of the world was such that it did not surprise him that she should want to leave it. There was the genito-revulsion of course, but perhaps also a genuine desire, matching his own, to evaporate together.

"Living seems to have lost its purpose," she said. "We live without knowing why and without an effort in doing so. Dying is at least positive."

"They will eradicate Bronstein," he said. "There is no hope of a cure for you now."

Inside the cylinder she smiled at him and the cameras began to turn. The voice of the P.I.P. penetrated the lustrivex as a whisper from far off. "For the greatest happiness of the greatest number, the Minister of Health together with Lilith a mistress well known in government circles . . ."

"Life has been niggardly with its miracles," she said, "but now, at the last moment, a miracle worthy of religious legend has leapt the gang-plank as the ship prepares to sail. I am cured."

"How do you know?" he asked.

"I feel a warmth and affection for you I never felt for any man. I have made the great discovery that emotion can exist detached from stimulus. It may endure when our atoms comeingle somewhere under the stars."

"Lilith!" he said.

"Do you know," she mused, "you and I are individuals for the first time in our lives. What we do has meaning and sense and substance. It has importance to us alone."

"It is a pity," he said, "that the Cylinder is not wired for sound."

He stopped to kiss her. The commentator waited for the moment of audience appeal, lip on lip. He signalled. The cameras closed in. The nation held its breath. The green button was depressed. There was a faint rustle as a million tongues travelled the area of a million dry lips. It was eradication like any other. The atoms of Child Manaton and Lilith were puffed through the ventilators merging with the molecules of air above the best of all possible worlds. The greatest number were very happy.

—ERNEST HILL

After all, how many of us know anything of the drains beneath our feet?

CLEANER THAN CLEAN

by R. W. Mackelworth

"Go away, go away . . . nasty, little man!"

Miss Ives intoned her demand through the open window and I feared for her safety if she leaned any further forward. She could so easily fall.

I imagined the flurry of her long legs waving urgently as she tipped over the sill and nose-dived into the neat, municipal flower beds.

As if he had read my mind, Peeble, short and stubby, smooth as a baby, ran to her side. Peeble wasn't gallant. Peeble was the boss. He liked everyone to know that and when the chance to assert himself came along he never passed it by.

He moved her back with a carefully imperious wave, reached up and slammed the window down. As he stretched and the well-pressed trouser turn-ups parted company with the highly polished shoes I saw his immaculate socks. I looked for a hole but there wasn't one—nor would there ever be.

"Enough, if you please, Miss Ives." He puffed his cheeks a little and put out his chest like a bantam cock. "We must not give him the impression he has rattled us. A scene is beneath the dignity of the Public Works department."

Later, as I sat on a bare hill contemplating my bare feet, I was to remember Peeble's dignity. It lasted until the very threshold of disaster.

At this time, however, all we had to worry about was a middle-aged man with a worried face and sandwich boards strapped to his anxiously thin body.

For the past month he had nagged at us like a bad tooth.

Lately, he had begun to haunt the office itself having progressed from warning letters to a warning presence.

If we had been the kind of people to scare easily the man and his odd warning, boldly printed on the sandwich boards, might have made an impression. It didn't, at least not the right one, and fate marched, or rather slithered on, unchecked.

Looking back we might not have checked it, even if we had taken Fowler seriously.

Miss Ives took him seriously. She took all men seriously. When she stumped back to her desk her face shone with happy terror. "I do think we should call the police again, Mr. Peeble, I really do." She turned to me for support. "Don't you agree, Mr. Smith?"

"Only a harmless nutcase." I wasn't keen on her idea. The local press has a way of making out a case of corruption from every incident concerning us. Being responsible for the drains seem to make me the prime scapegoat. "Let it ride, Miss Ives, for goodness sake."

"I don't know, Mr. Smith. It's all right for you. Suppose he's a maniac or a pervert? I mean so many of them are, aren't they?" Her tiny blue eyes shone like sparks of fear. "What about that then?"

"I think I would be in as much danger." I smiled at my own bawdy wit.

Peeble snorted. "Just a public nuisance, that's all, Miss Ives."

I repeated my own judgement. "A harmless nutcase."

It just about summed up my feelings. If he had seemed a respectable citizen at first, we might have listened to him. Though, of course, from the moment he started his campaign he was no longer respectable. The fuss made him embarrassing and no one in our town likes to be embarrassed.

The right approach is a complaint about the rates.

Apparently, even our lad could work that one out. I must admit I hadn't expected it. After all, who would expect a character like that to own a three up and two down, even in Balaclava Avenue?

Perhaps you have noticed the worst of life's trials come when you are most relaxed. I was looking at the tenders for the new drains in Linden Drive, wondering how three of them managed to be the same, to the penny, when the boy

brought in a memorandum. Peeble snatched it—as usual. Then he slapped it on my desk.

It was about Fowler.

The rating department had received a long letter from him. Briefly, he said he wasn't going to pay. Not until we took his story about the drains seriously anyway. He was quite adamant.

The rating boys, like the tax people, weren't put out. They merely issued a summons. The date was fixed for a week hence and I cursed the idiot who delayed telling me, with the drains under fire, so to speak. On the other hand they had obviously thought the complaint so frivolous it didn't merit my appearance in court. In fact, on the corner of the paper someone had scrawled: "I bet this is your nutcase!"

I jumped up and looked from the window.

Peeble was already there. He was staring moodily at the message on the sandwich boards. It read exactly as the letter to rating had read—if you stripped away the other thousand words.

"THERE IS AN EVIL DOWN THE DRAINS!"

Fowler turned, to give us the benefit of his other board. The message on his chest he had certainly inherited with the boards. Black and bold it read:

"PREPARE TO MEET THY DOOM!"

"I haven't really got to go to court to face that, have I?" I looked at Peeble full of hope. My heart sank. He knew I hated appearing in court so he would send me. As a man of fine impatience he hated back sliding.

"Better go, Smith. I'll speak to the Clerk and fix it. A written statement is always an admission of weakness, I think." He sniffed importantly. "Have a look at this man's house and the drains thereabouts. Take Willy and his rods."

I took the plans of the Balaclava drain system and the flank roads for luck. With Willy McPhail and his rods I squeezed into the department's van and we headed for Fowler's home.

I wanted to tell McPhail all about it on the run out, but he was a sober Scot and there is nothing below or above ground that could shake the man. You can't tell a tall story to a dead pan. His craggy face and sad eyes never altered at

all even when his sad eyes had seen enough to wilt the soul. What's more he had no sense of smell.

It turned out that there appeared to be nothing wrong with Fowler's drains; either from the house or in the street outside. Not that I actually went into his house. You need permission from the owner and I didn't want to face the owner.

We did a smoke test and poked around a little with the rods. Willy had a few manhole covers up and shone his torch down into the main drain. There wasn't any evil discernible there. It was as white and clean as the detergent that flowed through it.

Fowler came along just as we were packing up.

"You believe me then?" His voice sounded normal at close range. None of the high-pitched whine which gives away the type that mislaid its marbles. The only sign of unbalance was the joy in his face. "Did you see it?"

The niceties of behaviour before, or after, a court case aren't lost on me. Council employees never talk to the opposition. The defendant can learn too much to his advantage and most of the byelaws are bluff. Apart from that the local reporters have ways of finding out what the man from the council says to a defendant. The most innocent remarks end up as pressures from the town hall, in print.

"Sorry, Mr. Fowler. Can't talk to you. Completely *sub judice*." I always found the last phrase telling. I don't know how far it applies to local scuffles but if it works who cares?

"Don't be silly, young man." He said it very softly and, at close quarters, his face looked very respectable. In a way he reminded me of a run-down Peeble. There were worry lines all over his forehead and dragging the corner of his mouth down. I also saw some pie crumbs round his mouth and I realised he had eaten his lunch on the hoof. "Listen, son, there is something in the drains. Come back tonight and I'll show you."

"No!" I was backing into the van and Willy was pulling at the gear lever. As he fought with the ancient gear box his expression was unchanged but I sensed he was amused. His humour is so dry I often miss it.

Peeble thought he was dependable. I always had the feeling he would write a book when he retired sending the

department up to heaven. He was an educated man like a lot of Scots in lowly jobs.

"That man may have something."

I stared at Willy. "Just listen to him for goodness sake!"

"Down the drain! I've seen it at night. In the light of the street lamp . . . moving. Please stop . . . listen . . . stop!"

We were away a second later but his voice followed us like a distant ghost crying from the willows down by the river.

I never like to walk by the river, out of the town anyway, for that reason. The towpath at night seems to be a nasty place—at least until the gasworks come into view. I'm strictly a gasworks man. That's why Fowler was never my cup of tea. He, and his evil down the drains, were a blasphemy on my idea of security. Too spooky.

Willy was very serious all the way home.

He didn't say a word but I could read his eyes.

For the first time I saw he was scared.

Magistrates' courts are supposed to dispense summary justice swiftly. They don't. I always turn up at ten hoping to be called right away. This time it was half-past eleven.

Fowler had put his case. He had said his piece about the drains and it had had an effect. You could cut the silence with a knife. I went in feeling like a small boy standing in rags on a main road waiting for a lorry to hit him.

The council's solicitor asked me a few questions. His voice was dull, matter of fact. It all came to one thing. Had I inspected the drains and had I found any defect?

I gave the usual careful answers.

Fowler couldn't contain himself. He shouted at me from the dock. His face was working overtime trying to give the words plenty of meaning.

"There is something down there. You must come at night. It's there then."

Jenkins, the Chairman of the magistrates, looked over his glasses as if he was sighting his eyes on Fowler's face. "Now then, Mr. Fowler. It isn't your turn to speak you know. If you want to ask Mr. Smith some questions you may do so . . . in due course."

I felt some sympathy for him standing there in the dock—

though it wasn't really a dock nor was he a prisoner. A rates summons doesn't make that kind of grade—yet.

The solicitor finished off with a few routine questions. He had the matter nicely tucked up in his mind. Fowler was rather strange: that was nothing exceptional. Only a strange man sees a bogey man in the drain and then lets the world know he's seen one. A sensible man keeps quiet.

Jenkins let Fowler have his say.

"When you inspected the drain in Balaclava Avenue." He paused to look round the men in the court room as if to assess their sympathy. His face was infinitely sad. "I want you to tell me what you saw."

"There was no defect," I said promptly.

"You noticed no bulging in the walls of the drain or anything in the drain which made you wonder?"

"Only the usual matter. Nothing different." I was beginning to enjoy the whole idea. I could see a thousand ways of teasing Fowler. "Nothing to make the walls bulge, I assure you."

He spoke to himself very softly but I couldn't hear what he said. Then, he spoke again, this time very loudly as if he wanted the whole world to hear him. "How many chemicals are passing into the drains each day and what is their make-up?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Isn't it possible that the mixture of chemicals could produce a dangerous substance?"

"It has been suggested." My answer was what he had wanted. I could see that by the hope which appeared on his face like a light. "On the other hand there is a considerable amount of water and that tends to dilute the chemical substances."

His voice was almost a whisper again. "There may be circumstances when water would increase the danger rather than mitigate it. It isn't just the risk of explosion. It's something else. That's what I have seen . . . at night."

Jenkins intruded and he sounded exasperated. "What have you seen Mr. Fowler?"

"A glow, an all-pervading brightness which lit the street for a few moments." His hands were trembling, either because of his memories or because he knew some of the

people in court were laughing at him secretly. "And in the light a moving shape."

"What kind of shape, Mr. Fowler?" Jenkins prodded like a sharp needle at the curious object he had caught in the defendant's stand. He collected bugs in his spare time and you could see he was thinking of Fowler in those terms.

"A growing mass. No shape at all. Just a growing white mass with a movement that seemed deliberate." Fowler managed to put such emphasis into his words that for the first time I felt he at least thought it was the truth.

"I think." Jenkins paused and peered at Fowler closely as if to make sure of what he thought. "I think you have suffered an hallucination, Mr. Fowler."

That seemed to end it.

Fowler was ordered to pay his rates by suitable instalments. It came out that he was a chemist until a year or so earlier but he had retired on a small pension. His retirement had been brought about by ill health. I didn't need to be told it was a nervous breakdown.

I heard Jenkins ask the Clerk "Can I remand that man for a medical report?"

The Clerk looked doubtful and I didn't hear his answer. I was too busy trying to push past the people and out into the fresh air.

I had had a dreadful intuition.

Peeble was waiting for me in the office and pacing up and down like a caged pussy cat. He gripped my shoulder and steered me into the little room we used as a waiting room for visitors.

"Did you ask Willy to take another look at the Balaclava Avenue drains?" His voice was strained and rather demanding.

I noticed a little twitch by his mouth. It only appeared when we were under fire.

"What's happened, Sir?"

"Did you damn well tell him to do it?"

"No." I felt my stutter coming on so I kept my answer short.

"Thank goodness for that."

"What . . . what happened?"

"There was some kind of explosion and he was killed.

It was all very odd." He looked perplexed. "Some of the manhole covers were blown outwards and the ground was stained white all around; a brilliant white. Yet, no one heard any noise at all."

I stared sadly out of the window and thought that Willy's imaginary book would never be written. The street outside was empty. Even Fowler had vanished and his absence made more impression on me than his presence.

"It's all a coincidence. Unless our man Fowler dreamed this one up. In court he was carrying on about a white light exploding all over the place."

"Did he, indeed!" My remark seemed to give Peeble some purpose. "Fowler phoned here this morning and when he couldn't get you he spoke to Willy. Now, suppose Willy was lured out to a trap. Yes, a trap set by a mad man. It makes sense."

He picked up the phone and called the police.

It was a bare half-hour later when I reached the place where Willy had died. True enough there was a white stain on the grey pavement. Some of the drain covers had been flung back as if by a great force.

I looked and I suddenly found faith in Fowler. There had been an explosion. It had been enough to throw a volume of water over the road and the water had contained detergent. By some odd reaction the detergent had bubbled up and stained the ground.

As if to reinforce my idea a bright car swept round the corner and screeched to a halt behind the police cars stationed nearby. I stared at the strange character who jumped from the car and ran up to the door of a small house ringing a hand bell and singing. The song was about the power of soap or something. I saw his round face brightly shining as he engaged the tired woman, who opened the door, with ceaseless chatter. I think he was dressed as harlequin.

There was a sign on the top of the car.

"GORBO EATS DIRT!"

The woman had five packets. I saw her display them, all tiredness vanishing from her face, and take a pile of presents from the man. Then there was money and more chatter.

I pushed Peeble aside and went to the car.

The man ran out again, full of life, and ringing his silly bell as if he had plague to announce. I could see his face wasn't as convinced as his actions.

I caught his arm.

"Is this Gorbo a new powder?"

He winked at me. "The name is, old man. I don't know what muck they've put in the packet." He seemed relieved to say what he really felt. "We have just started pushing it. This was a trial area. Now we have delivered sample packets all over town and they hope to take the whole market."

I took the sample he gave me.

In small print was the name of the manufacturer.

That afternoon I phoned them. They pushed me from one executive to another and finally I was through to a chemist. I asked him what was in the detergent.

He clammed up and I could almost hear his anxious breathing. "I'm afraid I'm not permitted . . ."

He started to sound pompous so I hung up.

There seemed to be only one answer.

I set out to look for Fowler.

Really, he was a decent old chap. He had left his sandwich boards propped against the door of his house. On them he had pinned a long note. The gist of the note was clear enough. Possibly his mind had become clearer when he faced the fact that no one believed him. He was wrong, I remember thinking, because the risk was explosion not the far-fetched theory he put forward.

I put the note in my pocket and went round to the back door. Through the window I saw him. I broke the glass and smelt the tainted air, laced with gas.

His head was in the oven on a cushion.

That night I went for a walk by the river. I felt I had to face the unknown and the fear that haunted the towpath. As a kind of mental discipline I walked away from the gas-works; put them out of my mind, all those steady, rusty symbols. Two men dead in one day had done something to me and Peeble and his dignity hadn't made it easier to bear.

Again I read Fowler's note. I stopped by one of the rare lamps on the towpath and scanned every line. Finally, I dropped it into the river aware that I had disposed of a

suicide's confession and it was wrong. It was just that I couldn't see the man make a fool of himself after his death as he had in life.

All the nonsense about the secret ingredient in Gorbo. As if a substance akin to yeast could be used in a detergent, a substance with some of the attributes of life. Even his explanation about the forms of algae that absorbed rock or the allegory of the ameoba swallowing its prey by similar absorption made no sense. Gorbo couldn't really eat dirt. Only men could do that.

My walk followed the loop of the river. It had begun to drizzle and I hurried knowing I could cross the bridge half-a-mile on and enter the town again. The rain fell harder and I ran.

It was at the bridge I stopped.

I thought at first the town was on fire. The light was too bright however. It waxed and waned, it seemed, with the force of the rain on my bare head. I heard the subdued roar of water and in my head I traced the big sewers that brought the waste down to the filter beds.

I backed across the bridge.

I added and subtracted the thousand substances borne away underneath on the flood. Any dozen could cause an explosion but what would it take to make something else? I knew it was stupid, insane but my body said otherwise. The hill behind the town became my goal, my refuge and I began to run.

I must have slept on that bare hill. In the morning the flashing brilliance of the town was like the eye of an explosion. It was as bright as the sunlit iceberg. The brightness must have woken me.

For one moment I hoped. All the buildings stood as firmly as before. I could see them like a town plan in the Surveyor's office small, distant but perfect and very clean. Not a speck of dirt. All white . . .

. . . and not a soul stirring.

—R. W. MACKELWORTH

The great success of Housel in a recent issue made us ask Alan Burns for more of the same—what arrived was something quite different.

PASSENGER

by Alan Burns

A big man, Rankin Crayle. Seeming to fill the window of his flat as he sat on the sill, swirling monogrammed cooling cubes in his drink. He ignored the accusation of the lektype on the table, with the pile of blank sheets waiting to be filled with his imaginings. Writing and sultry weather never mated as far as he was concerned, hence he sat, looking down five floors to the street along which an occasional hover softly whined. A hire vehicle slid out of sight as it stopped under the block's canopy to set someone down. He wondered idly who it could be, for each of the fifty tenants in Threeway Court had at least one hover and were careful to let the world know. So, a visitor, but to whom. Five minutes passed, then he wasn't too surprised when his doorbell rang. For decency he zipped up his shirt which had been open to the waist and went to answer. For long seconds he stood looking at the girl in the hall.

"Come in Killer," he said smoothly. She came in as he quietly appreciated her. Honey blonde hair was common in girls, good figures in the days of lycra foundations were equally common, and pleasant features were issued quite randomly, but each girl has something over and above that visible only to one man. Rankin was the one who saw the Killer.

"Nice place you have Rank," she said.

"Will introduce," he smiled. "48 Threeway Court meet Miss Cilla O'Dare of North Island New Zealand. Miss O'Dare meet the flat." She curtsied, gave a sort of lopsided grin and said:

"Well, I mean a girl could melt in all this heat Rank. Make it tall and cool like you and a kick in the heart likewise."

"Thought you stratted out last night," he queried as he worked at the bar.

"Could've," she agreed, "would've if that ambulance hadn't been on the scene so conveniently to pick up Mrs. Guiner. I'm cat-curious Rank. I never saw you touch her until a minute before she collapsed. What gives?" The visi tinkled, he picked up the handset and depressed the button that cut off the image.

"Handley here," cracked the voice at the other end, "our pigeon's died, see you tomorrow." There was a click as the sending handset was hung up, and slowly Rankin put his own unit down.

"Was the pigeon's name Guiner?" asked Killer.

"What big ears you have grandmother," he said, "you heard the rest?"

"She was a nice pigeon," she remarked softly, "plump, not harming anyone, I can't imagine her dying in agony Rank, but she did, didn't she?"

"I suppose so," he replied. "It was agony to her. To us? A cold wet day, with wind-roar and racing clouds. That was what Handley used. Cold water jets and cold air. You don't die of that, Killer, not unless you're of different stuff to us. But how do you know as much as—as you do know?"

"If I tell does it buy me in?"

"It buys you a chance to get out before I turn you over. I like you a lot Killer, more than words can tell. But I'm dedicated to a work. The most I can do is to give you a chance to run if you talk."

"I don't run Rank. Turn me over if you like, but I offered a deal don't forget, and I'd sooner speak because I wanted to, rather than die dumb."

"On your own head be the buying then," he answered. "Handley has a project for hunting aliens, and I'm one of his trappers. Mrs. Guiner I thought was one and she or it is now known to be one. That's the bald outline, Handley will fill you in tomorrow. Now how about the things you're going to tell me?"

"You won't believe this Rank but I'm a sensitive. I know I don't look like it, don't even act like it, but now and then I hear things other people don't hear, and get impressions others don't. Like when your friends took Mrs. Guiner away. It was smoothly done and no-one but me paid any attention. Then when I was waiting at the stratoport I felt such a burst

of misery that it was more than I could stand. You gave me your address, and I decided that I just had to see you and ask what you were doing."

"Well, now you know, and if you go along with me to see Handley tomorrow by this time in the evening you too may be a pigeon."

"I may, but would you tell me why Handley is cruel like that?"

"Field mice," he smiled. "When Handley was a bit younger he had a country cottage that was overrun with mice. So he tried the habit of putting down food in a certain spot for them, but they still bothered him. He deeply regretted doing it but he acquired a cat and a set of traps, pretty soon the mice didn't bother him. He found an alien when he was playing with a new type of transistor set-up for tapping brain currents. The alien used a heat gun and Handley used a Cato rifle. Thereafter he went after aliens in earnest with the blessing of all the responsible governments. So far everyone has preferred to fight it out except Mrs. Guiner, who was taken by a trick."

"Funny that," she remarked. "It never occurred to me that you were anything else but an author looking for copy. I thought you were an extremely nice person. Why didn't my talents register?"

"I was an author looking for copy," he answered simply, "and I don't have enemies that I know of. I've been around before I settled down, mostly working in the World Relief Service during the Indian Rebellion and the consequent famine in Rajputana. I was jailed by the Rajput People's Republic and had to make a few enemies, the best part of whom are dead. But after I escaped from clink I was sent elsewhere until I came out of the W.R.S. Accordingly I suppose that adds up to being a nice person, does it?"

"It does for now," she agreed. "All right, I'm here, it's late afternoon and I haven't eaten in some time. In return for all the sweet nothings you said to me on the holiday suppose you produce a concrete something to eat."

"Not here," he said. "I only keep drinks and salt biscuits. I'm a member of the River Club since I have a small hydrofoil, I can feed you there and get you a room to use while you're here. How long do you intend to stay?"

"I was supposed to be back at my desk tomorrow which is of course impossible. So the question is how long do you intend me to stay?"

"The longer the better, permanently if it can be arranged. I'm suddenly used to your being around. Be serious Killer, all the things I said to you I meant."

"I know Rank," she answered soberly, "and I want like anything to settle down. If it hadn't been for the Guiner business I would have written steadily to you and let our acquaintance ripen into marriage. But the one thing I need is certainty, and right now I'm not sure of a single thing."

"Give it a whirl then," he told her, "we'll talk after you've seen Handley."

Rankin felt almost cheerful the next day. The sultry heat had given way to a violent thunderstorm the previous night which had brought a morning of blue skies and sunshine. He had found accommodation for Killer at the River Club and she had hinted at a prolonged stay and finding a post in the town. There was only the interview with Handley. Handley's father had had a small business making surgical supplies which his son had turned into a large organisation dealing mainly in vaccines. The thing that had made Handley what he was was a terrifying curiosity in the oddest directions, and though it had yielded many profitable things it did nothing towards increasing his popularity, which was probably why he wasn't married. Rankin, up to the time of Killer's being involved, had respected Handley as a fair employer, but as soon as Killer got into the car beside him his cheerfulness evaporated and he was suddenly afraid.

"Stop worrying," she said as they drove out of town, "the worst he can do is to kill me."

"If that was all I don't think I would mind," he answered, "but it's what would precede that that I worry over. All of us—well most of us anyway, have a point beyond which our own humanity prevents us doing certain things. Fifty years ago I understand that there were doctors in the concentration camps of the Reich who did experiments on human beings without thought of the suffering they caused, Handley's pretty much like them. He can be absolutely inhuman when he's curious about something."

"Like aliens?" she enquired.

"Probably. He wants to know what makes them tick. How do they react to pain, to pleasure, how do they reproduce? Mrs. Guiner was the start. She died but he'll have learnt from her at least enough to devise an absolutely effective way of hunting them down." Abruptly he brought the hover to a stop, for Killer had suddenly gone pale and fainted. He swung the vehicle into the roadside and opening a glove compartment he took out a flask of brandy and forced a little between Killer's lips. She came round and smiled weakly.

"Damned talent," she whispered. "I felt—oh well I guess you would call it the worst of terrors. Go on, let's see what Handley makes of me."

The Handley Company's works were well guarded, but Rankin seemed to have been expected for the guards on the gates opened them at once and waved him through. As usual, the location board told him that Handley was in the experimental block, a big domed structure within its own fencing at one corner of the works. It was surrounded by a moat first of all, and within that was a fence carrying a fatal charge of electricity. All vehicles were left at the gates, and the only way in was through a special entry building. Rankin explained to Killer than getting in meant a shower and a change of clothes. He watched her into the door marked "WOMEN", then went through the other door marked "MEN". At last he was in the entry tunnel to the block and soon Killer rejoined him, gowned and masked as he was. There was a silence as they walked along the tunnel, and it was only broken when they went through a pair of sliding doors, operated by a beam lock. Handley had his office just beyond these and a voice from a speaker grille above the door told them to come in.

The office was austere furnished, the only picture on the walls being one of a battle-scarred cat, the tom Rouser, who had been as much of a friend to Handley as he had ever had, and who had recently gone to whatever paradise was reserved for felines. Handley got up from his seat as they entered and came round the desk.

"Good to see you Rankin, and you too Miss O'Dare. The various taps I have in Rankin's surroundings have given me enough information to make me curious about you.

I'm turning you over to our medical department of course. Rankin is worried for you I see, be flattered, it isn't everyone he worries for." As if in response to some invisible summons the office door opened and a nurse came in. She led Killer away and as the door closed behind them Handley said.

"You needn't waste nervous energy worrying Rankin. She'll be classified as all human I'm certain. The aliens have a certain something about them, that's why they tend to mingle in crowds, like Mrs. Guiner, who was never seen completely alone. They are most curious creatures. Come with me and I'll show you." Rankin followed him out of the office, along a corridor and into a laboratory where several people were standing round a big stone bath doing things with different instruments. Lying in the bath was something that resembled a monstrous slug.

"Since you are no biologist Rankin," said Handley, "I shall ask you for a layman's view of this creature. Tell me what you think of it?"

"How did it get here?" asked Rankin.

"How does anything travel through space?" asked Handley.

"To travel by vehicle implies making that vehicle," Rankin replied. "On that tour I never saw Mrs. Guiner do one single thing other than eat, rest, look and talk. She wouldn't lift a case even. But she paid, paid and paid. She had the idea that you can buy anything with money, her husband, she said, made money."

"Money," said Handley, "a portable store of value. Her husband did make money, on a duplicator. Always coins, always quite indetectable from the real thing. I could do the same here with no trouble at all. However our associates in New York have been most thorough, they raided the Guiner household, but of course the alien, having the ability to assume any shape at will eluded them. But a great deal of useful equipment was found. Now throughout the world there is a massive check going on. Everyone without valid means of support—and we include those who do not work—has to answer to the authorities and prove that they are human."

"But if the aliens can assume any shape what's to prevent them replacing prominent people and taking over the world?" Rankin asked.

"There the chain breaks," Handley remarked. "I have certain theories which I shall attempt to prove. But one thing is sure. If we purge ourselves of the incubus now on Earth we shall have passed a test, whether or not it was set us deliberately." Everyone looked at him but he said no more.

After a while Rankin went out to the reading room of the experimental block. He was absolutely certain that Handley was deliberately withholding information from him, probably to drive him into a certain course of action. He had been told at the outset that he must do as he was ordered, without questioning the rights or wrongs unless it transgressed his personal ethics. In return for blind obedience he had been set up as an author, and once given the start, Rankin found that, by drawing on his experiences while rolling round the world, he could tell a very acceptable tale, and the original straw editor of Handley's had been discarded in favour of genuine ones who paid quite well. There was even a novel partly completed in his files and Rankin knew that he was quite independent of Handley. But he also knew that nothing could make him leave until Handley released him.

The hours passed. Rankin found no desire for lunch and remained in the reading room, trying to get interested in the magazines, but in the end he gave it up. He thought about Killer, mostly of the curious fact that she was a sensitive. He had met her at the start of a ten lands tour by strato. The bus from the pickup point out to the stratoport hadn't had any wings to its seats, and Killer had been up all the previous night transferring her things from the intercontinental stratoport to the tour pickup point. Rankin sat beside her and minutes after the bus started had found a head lying on his shoulder. He had said nothing until they stopped at the stratoport and then received profuse apologies from her. Oddly enough her seat was beside his on the strato and that was how it had started in earnest. But there had been no evidence of sensitivity during the tour, in fact it seemed only to have started since Mrs. Guiner had been caught. He had the terrible feeling of something being wrong without knowing what. When the door of the room clicked open he jumped up with a start, it was Killer.

"Well," she said, "it seems I'm clean." She sounded weary. "Take me away from here Rankin," she went on.

"All right," he agreed. It seemed that Handley had given them permission because the beam locks opened for them.

Outside in the late afternoon sunshine Killer seemed to cheer up, so when Rankin suggested a trip round the countryside with a farmhouse tea as an additional treat he found her almost eager. The countryside was quiet and the tea was good. On the way back to the town Rankin stopped his car by a small river and said to Killer:

"I'd like to talk to you, if you've no objection."

"As long as it isn't about Handley. I've been drugged and knocked about enough for one day."

"It's about us," he answered. "You said to me that you would have been content to have married me once, but not now because you're confused and uncertain. Up to today I was the same way myself, but I'm not any longer, because of what Handley said to me while I was looking at what had been Mrs. Guiner. He said that if we rid ourselves of these aliens we shall have passed a test, which may or may not have been set us deliberately."

"But why should we hunt them?" she asked, "what harm have they done, what harm are they doing? Take Mrs. Guiner. She was on the boards of dozens of societies for raising money for good works. She was area chairman of a section of the World Relief Service for instance, she gave you the money to do what you did."

"I would have liked to have thought that," he answered, "I did think it until I came back to HQ and they sent me out to give lectures on the relief work they did. At each society, group, or meeting where I talked I asked to see a balance sheet. Do you know that there are firms making a good profit just getting tins ready for public collections? Then there are teas for the so-called workers, lunches and dinners for the top group who lend their names, and in some cases only fifty per cent of what was collected actually got to the World Relief Service."

"You're bitter Rankin," she said. "Mrs. Guiner told me that she wanted to go and help in India but no transport was available."

"I agree, you had to go on your own two feet, at least from a forward base. But all right, I'm willing to admit that Mrs. Guiner had the best of intentions, but she was an alien

and wouldn't admit it. But now we're arguing and I didn't want us to. I'm going to ask you straight out Killer, will you marry me?"

"No," she answered, "nor anyone else from this world. I think it's a rotten place."

"That's why I asked you," he said, "so that you can work with me to improve it."

"I can't," she told him, "I would but—" she buried her face in her hands. "Take me back to town," she whispered, "I've a dreadful headache, it must be something that they did to me while I was drugged today."

He saw her to the River Club where she was staying, at the entrance she said.

"I think it would be better if we didn't see each other again Rankin. I'm not sure what I'll be doing. I suppose our holiday romance was just that and no more."

"Anyway that keeps you happy Killer," he replied. "It was good knowing you." He walked away from her to his hover. As he started the motor he looked in the driving mirror, she was still stood at the club entrance. He drove back to his flat, mixed a drink and then went out to make a night of it at the small inn near the flats. At closing time he came out arm in arm with Jenkin Frip one of his friends. Jenkin agreed to see him so far on his way, and left him leaning against the archway that led into the inner court of his block. Rankin watched the other go, then leant his head against the cool concrete. He was as drunk as he had ever been, he decided, everywhere appeared to be undulating as if viewed through water. He looked into the archway and in the glow of the lights of the inner court he saw a silhouette.

"Killer," he said hoarsely, "Killer it's me." She came forward, a peculiar sort of gun in her hand.

"I know it's you Rankin," she said. "now just walk nice and slowly to your car and you won't get hurt." That shocked him into sudden sobriety.

"Where'd you learn that Killer?" he asked, "Week-end trivvy?"

"Your car Rankin," she said, "for me and my friends." Then he realised why things had appeared to move, for it seemed round them were flowing creatures, who had previously had the shapes of part of the walls.

"These aren't your friends Killer," he answered, "never were and never will be. As for threatening me, I could take that gun off you any time I chose."

"But not for long Rankin," she said, "now do you lead us to your car?"

"As you wish," he replied.

As they went down to the underground garage he remembered Handley's instructions in detail, that the one thing he couldn't afford to lose was his life, and hence if an alien turned nasty it should be obeyed in any orders given. But as the creatures flowed into his hover he tried to rationalise Killer's part in the affair. Somehow she had been got at, but how or why he couldn't understand, any more than he couldn't understand why Handley's people hadn't detected it. Any further thoughts were interrupted by Killer's order to him to get into the car and drive as she instructed. He started the vehicle and took it out of the garage and on to the motorway out of town. They went north at full speed. He soon lost track of the way, as they sped along country roads, but he was fairly certain they were making for a big stretch of moorland in one of the national parks. At last he was told to stop and there was silence. Then above the night sounds of the moor there was a faint swishing sound and in the dim light he saw a black shape drop out of the sky.

"Escape unit Killer?" he asked.

"If you and your friends hadn't been unreasonable it wouldn't have been needed," she answered. He looked at the ship and guessed that its cubic capacity wasn't as great as a stratojet's.

"Are these all there are of your friends?" he enquired.

"There are lots more," she replied, "the craft there is just a transport to the main carrier, orbiting outside the Solar System where your detectors don't look."

"We may have looked but said nothing," he told her. "Well, let's get in." He walked toward the ship with Killer, and even caught her arm to steady her when she stumbled. He knew that he could have taken the weapon off her any time he wished, but he obeyed Handley's instruction. There was no seating accommodation in the craft so he hunkered down comfortably against the wall while Killer operated the simple controls. He felt an upward acceleration, and pre-

sently the horizon seen in a screen above the control panel became curved and he knew they were in space. He felt forward movement, and so having nothing better to do he drowsed. Presently Killer sat on the floor beside him, and soon her head flopped against his side.

A feeling of deceleration woke him. Instinctively he glanced at his watch and saw that four hours had passed. Gently he shook Killer. She looked at him and her hand flew to the weapon lying on the floor beside her.

"It's still there," he told her, "I could have taken it but why should I?"

"I don't understand you Rankin Crayle," she said.

"The Killer I knew would understand."

"There hasn't been a change. I knew about my friends all the time, I, I was acting a part you see."

"You're a damn poor actor then," he told her. "Well where are we?" He looked at the screen, and at first thought they were approaching an asteroid, but then saw that it had a more regular shape than any lump of rock. It was a ship, but one of incredible age.

"Well well," he remarked, "the original Flying Dutchman, condemned to wander through the seas of space for all eternity. Will I meet Captain Van der See?" He smiled to himself, for he felt Killer's hand creep into his. She was as ignorant about it as he was.

Lock contact was made and presently they were walking through a bleak set of passages followed by the several aliens who had come with them. They came at last to what Rankin supposed was the control room. It was a big place, crowded with the black shapes of the occupants. He sized it up quickly, and knew that it had been designed for use by people very much like himself, and certainly not by the writhing sluglike aliens. One of them seemed to be in control, for as it flowed towards them the rest moved aside.

"Greetings," Rankin said with irony, "captain." Part of the other suddenly changed into a head, but a head that was no better shaped than a child could do with modelling material.

"Our robotic instrument was successful in bringing you," the alien said. "That was well, we need you."

"Robotic instrument?" Rankin enquired.

"The control you call Cilla O'Dare. Does that shock you Rankin Crayle? That you desired to mate with a mere instrument."

"Tighten your control," Rankin said looking at Killer, "it's showing emotion. Instruments shouldn't have that failing. You say you need me, why?"

"For a purpose which you shall find out. We are all here, so we shall leave this system." Almost as if she were sleep-walking Killer went to the controls and began working them. The screens which had been showing stars dissolved into incredible patterns of colour, and a great cube, made of some transparent material began to fill with lights and a tiny red point began to move slowly within it.

"Interesting," Rankin remarked. "I gather we are now practising interstellar travel. That is good, I think that those who sent me will be pleased."

"You were not sent, you were brought by us," the creature said.

"You're wrong," he answered. "I could have made an escape at any time. I am here because I wished it, and because I wanted to see that no harm came to my instrument as you quaintly call her. All of you are done for, as surely as if you had brought a time bomb aboard instead of me. I don't know why you need me, unless it is to make a bargain with people like those who built this craft. But I don't find myself able to agree to anything like that."

"Not even with persuasion?" the alien asked.

"No. If you feel that I may be persuaded through Killer think again. She was treated by my friend Handley. I don't know what he did to her, but I'm prepared to wager that it spells death for all of you." Killer paled, and slumped inertly to the floor.

"Tell me more about your control of Miss O'Dare," Rankin said softly, as he went over to Killer and rolled his jacket to put under her head. "Why does she faint when I say something that worries you? Can it be that you are so far gone that you even get someone to worry for you?"

"We channel anxiety through our control," the other admitted.

"I thought so," Rankin said. "But it isn't much use if your control faints with overload. You need a stronger vehicle, like me for instance. Can you make a transfer?"

"Easily. You see when we brought you to the system you mistakenly imagined as being that of your birth the circuitry for control was implanted on the skin of your cranium. But at some time it was damaged and therefore inoperative. But now it shall be restored. Indeed that is a good idea. Do you submit freely?"

"I offered didn't I?" he said, "providing Miss O'Dare is freed from your control."

"She will be freed. She was taken over when it was found you were uncontrollable. We thought that she might become an indirect control of you."

"How wrong you were," said Rankin, "well get on with it."

The transfer was hardly as painful as Rankin imagined it would be. The alien leader let a part of itself briefly touch Killer's head, then it flowed over to him. He felt an icecold sensation on his scalp and then almost immediately the anxiety of an entire race slammed cruelly down on him. He fought it grimly, and his experience of worry helped him to bear it. He remembered little incidents that assisted, like being on the run in the Rajput People's Republic and lying still while a King Cobra slithered over his feet, or reaching for a coin in the Mafia initiation ceremony, while the members thrust at its with their knives. He pulled himself up straight and looked down at Killer who was stirring.

"Hallo Earth woman," he said. She looked at him.

"Rank," she murmured, "what have they done to you?"

"Just transferred something, You don't have to worry for them any more."

"You said Earth woman."

"That's so. I thought you were the alien, but it seems I am. I'd better report to Handley when we get back."

"You will never return," said the alien leader.

"I forgot our friend here," he remarked. "Do you believe him Killer?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'm frightened Rankin."

"You've the gun."

"Think they'd trust me with anything that worked?" she asked bitterly.

"Come to think of it no," he agreed. He looked at the

alien. "If you want pilot and hostage to arrive in good condition you'd better provide some facilities," he said.

"You will find what you need in the ship's after part," came the answer.

Hand in hand they went exploring. The ship was old, but they found stocks of food and drink preserved by some means that was beyond their knowledge. After they had eaten they returned to the control room. By that time use had made the race anxiety bearable to Rankin and so he was able to take an interest in the mechanics of the ship and its control. With the removal of the control from her Killer was no longer used by the aliens to make adjustments, instead Rankin found himself receiving impulses to operate certain levers and switches. He felt fairly sure that he could resist the impulses if he chose, but he felt that the time was not opportune to try. He found that the ship was capable of perhaps two or three lightyears per day, and that the destination was his own native system, where, as a hostage, he would be used by the aliens to make a bargain for their being allowed to land and be maintained. He discovered that his ideas about the aliens were correct, they were no more than intelligent parasites, and had been chased out by one host system after another. Earth had seemed a good place, because of the fact that simple duplication of money units enabled them to get all they required, but as with so many systems they had been ejected, and they were desperate.

Rankin found that he slept restlessly after he had been made a control. There were no places to sleep available, what comfort there was the aliens monopolised. So he slept as best he could with his back to the control bench. Secretly he envied Killer, who curled up, with his coat as a pillow and slept soundly. She had earned it, he thought. With a load of race anxiety she must have had a few disturbed nights. Finally he dozed, and then suddenly he was jerked awake by a fearful anxiety load. He looked up, Killer was standing by the controls and the great navigating unit was a smoking ruin.

"We have them Rankin," she said. "I've destroyed the navigating system, now they are lost in space. We won't survive but neither will they." A weapon was already appearing in one of the alien leader's pseudopods.

"Stop," shouted Rankin, "you will kill Miss O'Dare and you'll have to kill me. I may be able to find a way to fly without the navigating unit, but you must let me think first."

"Then think well," said the alien, "or your death and the woman's will not be easy." Rankin thought furiously. It was long odds that Handley's people had planted a post-hypnotic command in Killer, but if so it was equally certain that there was a way to get back to Earth. They had come approximately six lightyears. He looked at the screens, but there wasn't a recognisable star formation and anyway his astronomy was meagre. Now he had once had a control unit, but Handley had wrecked it. It was restored and presumably operated by some form of microwave transmission. There was a remote possibility that what could receive microwave could receive other parts of the broadcast spectrum.

"A way suggests itself to me," he said finally. "I can recognise the broadcast signals from my own system and perhaps I can pick them up through my control unit. You must give me a chance by stopping all broadcasts to the unit for a while. But first you must show me how to operate the controls on my own."

"That will be done," the alien leader agreed, "but remember, any tricks and you die."

Learning how to use the ship's controls was not easy, for the aliens had only used the rudimentary movements to go from one system to another. However at last Rudkin was satisfied that he could at least travel in a desired direction, and so he prepared to put his plan into operation. He consulted his calendar watch and then stood still and listened. It wasn't easy, for he was hearing more with the mind than the ears. But at last it came, faint and far, odd words from Earth. Frantically he concentrated and at last he got a date. Blindly he set a direction, moved the ship through a few light weeks and listened again. It was hard exacting work, with mistakes and trouble to dog him. But worst of all was the fact that he couldn't tell Killer that this was the only way. But in a week the ship was heading into the Solar System and Rankin turned from the controls and found himself looking into a weapon held by the alien leader.

"You have betrayed us," it said, "and you will be killed."

"What would you accomplish other than revenge?" he

asked. "Your vessel is being tracked now. Land anywhere but where you are told and you would be blown out of space. When you do land you'll be examined and there will be no escape."

"There is another way," came the answer, "continue with your operation of the controls." Rankin found he could operate visually, for the ship had more than enough speed to enable him to dispense with complicated calculations to be at the spot on the orbit where a planet would be also. He was also able to listen in to the web of radio beams linking the colonised planets to Earth, and one after another they announced his presence. At last he heard a repeated message beamed at him, with instructions where to land the great ship. He knew that by landing it the vessel would be wrecked, but he supposed that was what Handley and the others behind him wanted. The place to which he was directed was a deserted part of Siberia, but as it swam up towards him he saw that it was deserted no longer. He guessed that two or three divisions of Security troops had been flown in, and the area in which he set down the ship was ringed by rocket launchers. He felt a violent jolt as the ship dropped the last few feet and then he heard a scream from Killer. He spun round and looked, not at aliens but at duplicates of himself and Killer.

"Yes," purred a duplicate of him, "they will not do anything until they have examined each of us to see who is real, and in that time most of us will escape, since none of your prisons can hold us."

"Handley will have a way," he said. He looked at the group of Killers, one of whom he supposed was the real one and smiled. "Coming girls?" he asked.

He was far down in the ranks of those leaving the ship. They all went out into the open and lightly as dragonflies three helis leapt into the air and took up positions over them. Rankin saw the canisters of napalm slung along their sides and also cylinders containing some sort of gas.

"All of you," roared a voice from a hundred speaker units, "it is known that among you are only two humans. If, at the conclusion of a test which will begin in one minute, these two are harmed then all of you will be destroyed." There was dead silence and Rankin felt a roaring sea of anxiety

welling up about him. Then suddenly the helis began discharging gas, and as it hit him his world exploded in an agony of sneezing. Through his streaming eyes he saw other aliens trying to imitate him but then he collapsed to the ground and barely felt masked Security men picking him up, while others dashed about wielding drug guns.

He came back to normality in a field surgery. Handley poured him a drink with clinical precision.

"Welcome to Earth," Handley said agreeably.

"Where's Killer?" he asked, ignoring the drink.

"You haven't time to go chasing women for a while yet," Handley told him, "You've all the world to meet. Ministers and scientists and—" Rankin jumped up from his seat and grabbing Handley lifted the smaller man off the floor. Handley grinned and said, "Put me down you foolish alien, your Earth girl's all right, we have the others safely where they can't escape, why prejudice your good standing by being violent."

"I'm not being violent," he argued. "I merely want my girl. I've flown spaceships, borne anxiety beyond anything you can imagine and in general been a good boy. Be reasonable Handley."

"All right if you put me down. As a matter of fact she's in the waiting room through that door." He set the other down and went through the door. Killer got up from her seat.

"Hallo Rankin," she said quietly.

"Hallo," he said in his turn. "I guess you Earth people are clever, reasoning that the only things the aliens couldn't do were the trivial things that are done automatically, like sneezing."

"We are clever," she admitted.

"Some time ago," he went on, "you said you wouldn't marry anyone from this world, and it seems that I'm not from here. Well what I mean is how about marrying someone not of this world?"

"I'll give the matter my serious consideration," she promised gravely.

—ALAN BURNS

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The Plague from Space

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